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The Islamic State Revolution

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“Virtue, without which terror is destructive; terror, without which virtue is impotent. Terror is only justice prompt, severe and inflexible; it is then an emanation of virtue.”
Maximilien Robespierre, *On the Principles of Political Morality*, 1794

In response to yet more slaughters perpetrated by the Islamic State (ISIL), security services deployed across Europe, Africa, and America.¹ U.S. and Russian forces ratcheted up air attacks in Iraq and Syria, while politicians and pundits hammered their publics into existential dread. Perhaps never in history have so few, with such meager means, caused such fear in so many. But it is easy amid the bullets, bombs, and bluster, to lose sight of a central fact in the fight against the violent forces of radical Islam: not only are we not stopping its spread, but our efforts to contain the contagion appear to contribute to its strength, while further constraining our own freedoms.

What accounts for the failure of “The War on Terror” and efforts to counter the spread and growth of “violent extremism?” Apart from the heedless reactions in anger and revenge that consistently engender more savagery than security is the failure to understand the revolutionary character of radical Arab Sunni revivalism, which ISIL now spearheads. For it is a dynamic countercultural movement of world historic proportions, with the largest and most diverse volunteer fighting force since World War II, and which, in less than two years, has created a dominion over thousands of square kilometers and millions of people.² What is more, though ISIL is the focus of this chapter and the most dynamic, it is not the only manifestation of the countercultural revolution, which has possible counterparts in other regions, embracing other ideologies and motivations.

What the United Nations and most of the international community regard as senseless acts of horrific violence are, to ISIL’s acolytes, part of an exalted campaign of purification through sacrificial killing and self-immolation: “Know that Paradise lies under the shade of swords,” says a hadith, now a motto of ISIL fighters, from the *Sahih al-Bukhari*, a collection of the Prophet’s sayings considered second only to the Quran in authenticity.

This is the purposeful plan of violence that Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, ISIL’s self-anointed Caliph, outlined in his call for “volcanoes of jihad:” to create a globe-spanning jihadi archipelago that will eventually unite to destroy the present world and create a new-old world of universal justice and peace under the Prophet’s banner. A key tactic in this strategy is to inspire sympathizers abroad to violence—do what you can, with whatever you have, wherever you are, whenever possible.

Dozens of structured interviews and behavioral experiments with youths in Paris, London, and Barcelona, as well as with captured ISIL fighters in Iraq and members of Jabhat al-Nusra (al-Qaeda's affiliate in Syria), have demonstrated clear lines of commonality among fighters. These interviews focused on youths from distressed neighborhoods previously associated with violence or jihadi support—for example, the Paris suburbs of Clichy-sous-Bois and Épinay-sur-Seine, the Moroccan neighborhoods of Sidi Moumen in Casablanca, and Jamaa Mezuak in Tetuán.³

Because many foreign volunteers—especially from Europe—are marginalized in their host countries, a pervasive belief in governments and nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) is that offering would-be enlistees jobs, education, or spouses could be the best way to reduce violence and counter the Caliphate's pull. But a yet unpublished report by the World Bank shows no reliable relationship between job production and violence reduction.⁴ (When a World Bank representative was asked why this was not published, he responded, "Our clients [governments] wouldn't like it because they've got too much invested in the idea.") If people are ready to sacrifice their lives, then it is not likely that offers of greater material advantages will stop them. In fact, research shows that material incentives, or disincentives, often backfire and instead raises the commitment of devoted actors.

Research also shows that most of those who originally joined al-Qaeda were married, and prior marriage does not seem to be a deterrent to those now volunteering for ISIL.⁵ And among the senior ranks of such groups, there are many who have had access to considerable education—especially in scientific fields, such as engineering and medicine, which require great discipline and willingness to delay gratification. Ever since the anarchists, this sort of specialized preparation holds for much of the leadership of insurgent and revolutionary groups.

Many in the West dismiss radical Islam as simply nihilistic. According to U.S. Secretary of State John Kerry, "ISIL is offering nothing to anyone except chaos, nihilism, and ruthless thuggery."⁶ As we shall see, ISIL does deal in chaos but works with a script and a purpose; however, nihilist it is not. Research suggests something far more menacing: a profoundly alluring mission to change and save the world. Indeed, jihadi volunteers believe they are combating the "nihilism" of the West—that is, a certain way of life that ends up destroying all moral constructs, religions, and metaphysical convictions (by relativizing everything, assigning it monetary value, etc.).

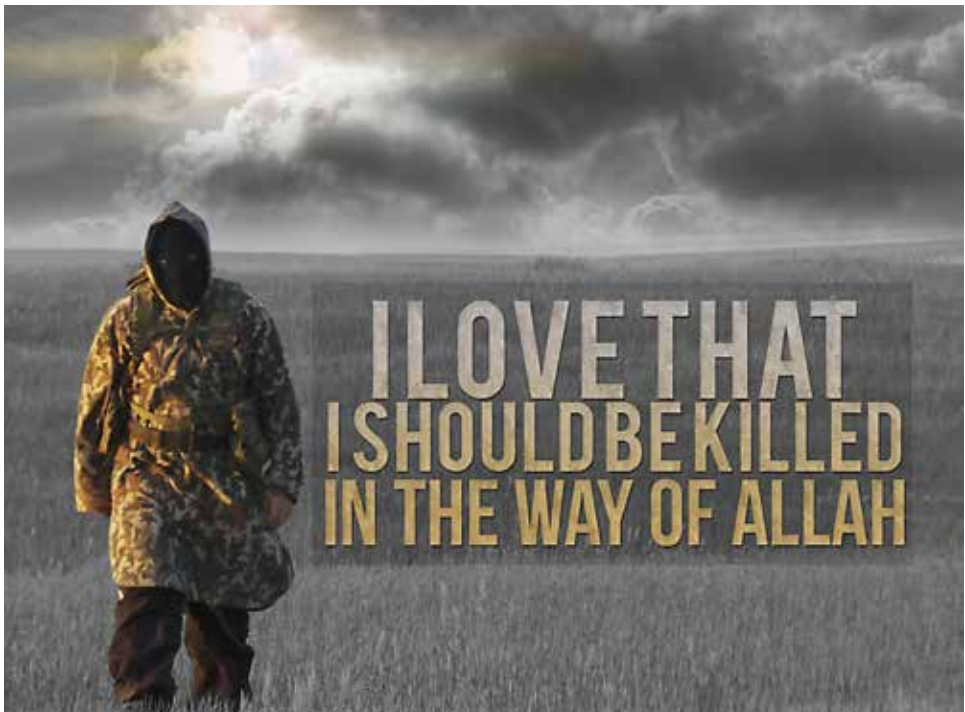
Terror's Sublime Virtue

In the West, the seriousness of this mission is denied. Olivier Roy, usually a deep and subtle thinker, writes in *Foreign Policy* that the Paris plotters represent most of those who flock to ISIL. They are marginal misfits largely ignorant of religion and geopolitics, and bereft of real historical grievances.⁷ They ride the wave of radical Islam as an outlet for their nihilism, because it is the biggest and baddest countercultural movement around.

However, the worldwide ISIL revolution is hardly just a bandwagon for losers. Although attacked on all sides by internal and external foes, ISIL has thus far only been contained and somewhat degraded in Iraq and Syria, while continuing to take root in ISIL-controlled areas and expanding its influence in deepening pockets throughout Eurasia and Africa. Repeated claims that ISIL was on the way to inevitable defeat ring hollow for almost anyone who has had direct experience in the field. Only Kurdish frontline combatants and some Iranian-led forces have managed to fight ISIL to a standstill on the ground, and only with significant French and U.S. air support. As of this writing, the first phase of the Iraqi army offensive to retake Mosul, aided by U.S. Marines and coalition air forces, was bogged down despite overwhelming superiority in manpower and firepower.⁸

Despite our relentless propaganda campaign against ISIL as vicious, predatory, and cruel, there is little recognition of its genuine appeal, and even less of the joy it engenders. The many young people who volunteer to fight for it unto death feel a joy that comes from joining with comrades in a glorious cause, as well as a joy that comes from satiation of anger and the gratification of revenge (whose sweetness, says science, can be experienced by brain and body much like other forms of happiness).⁹ As Osama bin Laden wrote in an elegy for the 9/11 hijackers, “embracing death, the knights of glory found their rest. They gripped the towers with the hands of rage and ripped through them like a torrent.” One young man from the Balkans, who is now fighting in Syria, expressed his joy as the “happiness of martyrdom,” sending us the following image:

Figure 3.1.



But there is also a subliminal joy felt across the region for those who reject ISIL's murderous violence, yet yearn for the revival of a Muslim caliphate and the end to a nation-state order that the Great Powers invented and imposed. It is an order that has failed, in their view, and that the United States, Russia, and their respective allies are trying willy-nilly to resurrect, and it is an order that many in the region believe to be the root of their misery. What the ISIL revolution is *not*, is a simple desire to return to the ancient past. The idea that ISIL seeks a return to medieval times makes no more sense than the idea that the U.S. Tea Party wants to return to 1776. "We are not sending people back to the time of the carrier pigeon..." Abu Mousa, ISIL's press officer in Raqqa, has said. "On the contrary, we will benefit from development. But in a way that doesn't contradict the religion."

ISIL's Caliphate seeks a new order based on a culture of today. Unless we recognize these passions and aspirations, joining with comrades in a glorious cause, the joy that comes from satiation of anger, and the gratification of revenge, and deal with them using more than just military means, we will likely fan those passions and lose another generation to war and worse.

Treating ISIL as merely a form of terrorism or violent extremism masks the menace. All novel developments are "extremist" compared with what was the norm before. What matters for history is whether these movements survive and thrive against the competition. Throughout history, success has depended on willingness to shed blood, including the sacrifice of one's own, not merely for family and tribe, wealth, or status, but for some greater cause. This has been especially true since the start of the Axial Age more than two millennia ago. At that time, large-scale civilizations arose under the watchful gaze of powerful divinities, who mercilessly punished moral transgressors—thus, ensuring that even strangers in multiethnic empires would work and fight as one.

Call it "God," or whatever secular ideology one prefers, including any of the great modern salvational *-isms*: colonialism, socialism, anarchism, communism, fascism, and liberalism. In *Leviathan*, Thomas Hobbes deemed sacrifice for a transcendent ideal "the privilege of absurdity to which no creature but man is subject."¹⁰ Humans make their greatest commitments and exertions, for ill or good, for the sake of ideas that give a sense of significance. In an inherently chaotic universe, where humans alone recognize that death is unavoidable, there is an overwhelming psychological impetus to overcome this tragedy of cognition: to realize "why I am" and "who we are."

In *The Descent of Man*, Darwin cast this devotion as the virtue of "morality...the spirit of patriotism, fidelity, obedience, courage, and sympathy" with which winning groups are better endowed in history's spiraling competition for survival and dominance.¹¹ Across cultures, the strongest forms of primary group identity are bounded by sacred values that are immune to material tradeoffs, carrots, or sticks—like unwillingness to sell one's children or sell out one's religion or country. Devotion to such values, as when land or law become holy or hallowed, leads some groups to prevail because of nonrational commitment from at least some members to actions that drive success, independent or out of proportion, from expected rational outlays and outcomes, risks and rewards, and costs and consequences.

Often such values are attributed to Providence or Nature, and embedded in notions whose meanings one can never quite pin down, and which cannot ever be definitively verified nor falsified by logic or empirical evidence, such as, “God is great; bodiless but omnipotent,” or “free markets are always wise.” Thus, while “sacred values” intuitively denote religious belief, as when land becomes holy, it can also include the “secularized sacred,” such as the hallowed ground of Gettysburg, or the site of the 9/11 attacks at New York City’s “Ground Zero.” For example, the foundational doctrines and beliefs of the great ideological *-isms*; the quasi-religious notion of the Nation itself, ritualized in song, ceremony, and sacrifice; and those “self-evident” aspects of “human nature” that humankind is supposedly endowed with, such as “inalienable rights of life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness,” which are anything but inherently self-evident and natural in the life of our species (cannibalism, infanticide, slavery, oppression of minorities, and male domination of women were more standard fare). It was not inevitable or even reasonable that conceptions of individual freedom and equality concocted by 18th-century European intellectuals should emerge, much less prevail. They did, only through revolution, intensive social engineering, economic competition, and belief in “just war.”

“Nothing human is alien to me,” said Terence, the Roman slave who became a playwright and gave the field of anthropology an enduring credo: to empathize with those most different from one’s own moral culture, without necessarily sympathizing. This is our call to comprehend. If we can only grasp why otherwise normal humans would want to die amidst killing masses of other humans who have harmed no one, we ourselves might better avoid killing and being killed.

In our preferred world of liberal democracy and human rights, violence—especially extreme forms of mass bloodshed—is generally considered pathological or an evil expression of human nature gone awry, or collateral damage as the unintended consequence of righteous intentions. But across most of human history and across cultures, violence against other groups is universally claimed by the perpetrators to be a sublime matter of moral virtue. For without a claim to virtue it is difficult, if not inconceivable, to kill large numbers of people innocent of direct harm to others.

What many in the international community do not understand is that these apparently senseless acts of horrific violence are, to ISIL’s followers, part of an exalted campaign of purification through sacrificial killing and self-immolation, to destroy what is presently corrupt in order to save what was pure in some past “Golden Age,” and to serve as a basis for the creation of a brave new world.

Besides the emotional appeal, brutal terror scares the hell out of enemies and fence-sitters. According to interviews with Kurdish leaders, when 350 to 400 ISIL fighters came in a convoy of some 80 trucks (each truck carrying about 4 or 5 fighters) to free Sunni captives (and massacre more than 600 Shia inmates) from Badoush prison in Mosul, Iraq’s second largest city, a relatively well-equipped Iraqi army of some 18,000 troops under American-trained leaders immediately melted into the city or ran away. When one Arab Sunni soldier embedded with a Kurdish Peshmerga force on the Mosul-Erbil front was asked why fellow soldiers fled, he simply said, “They wanted to keep their heads.”

The shutdown of Brussels in the wake of the Paris attacks, like that of Boston in the aftermath of the Boston Marathon bombings, speaks of comparable fear, and perhaps an underlying lack of faith in the solidity of our own societies and values. During World War II, not even the full might of the German Luftwaffe at the height of the Blitz could compel the British government and the people of London to cower so. Now, the mere mention of an attack on New York in an ISIL video has American officials scurrying to calm the public. Media exposure, which is the oxygen of terror in our age, not only greatly amplifies the perception of danger; but, in generating such hysteria, makes the bloated threat to society real. Because nowadays media is mostly designed to titillate rather than to inform, it has become child's play for ISIL and its ilk to turn our own propaganda machine and the world's mightiest into theirs—a novel, highly potent jujitsu style of asymmetric warfare that we could counter with responsible restraint, but which we do not.

The outcome is dangerous and preposterous. The U.S. Justice Department now considers the common kitchen pressure cooker to be a weapon of mass destruction if used for terrorism.¹² This ludicrously levels a cooking pot with a thermonuclear bomb, which has a destructive power that is a billion times greater. It trivializes true weapons of mass destruction, making their acceptance more palatable and their use more conceivable. In this present hyperreality, messaging is war by other means. ISIL's manipulation of our media creates a sense of foreboding of mass destruction where not really possible, and at the same time obscures any real future threat.

Asymmetric operations involving spectacular killings to destabilize the social order is a tactic that has been around as long as recorded history. Violent political and religious groups routinely provoke their enemies into overreacting, preferably by committing atrocities to get the others to drive in the sheep and collect the wool.

The violence of ISIL, like the revolutionary violence of many who came before, is perhaps best characterized by what Edmund Burke referred to as “the sublime:” willingness—indeed, need and passion—for the “delightful terror” of a sense of power, destiny, giving over to the infinite, ineffable, and unknown.¹³ “No passion so effectually robs the mind of all its powers of acting and reasoning as *fear*,” notes Burke, “For fear being an apprehension of pain or death, it operates in a manner that resembles actual pain. Whatever therefore is terrible, with regard to sight, is sublime.”

But for terror to succeed in the service of the sacred and sublime, “obscurity seems in general to be necessary,” Burke goes on, “Those despotic governments which are founded on the passions of men, and principally upon the passion of fear, keep their chief as much as may be from the public eye.”¹⁴ Al-Baghdadi, Prince of the Faithful, surely fits that bill. More generally, notes France's Charles De Gaulle in 1932, “there can be no prestige without mystery, for familiarity breeds contempt.” And so, too, “great leaders have always carefully stage-managed their effects” to “concentrate all efforts on captivating men's minds,” so that they may transcend themselves to act on behalf of a glorious, group-defining cause.¹⁵

The sublime is also intensely physical and visceral, steeped in emotion and identity, and not a core part of our recent and current ideologies that would favor reason and “the

mind” as the driver rather than a slave of the passions. There is no brainwashing, which is a leftover canard about Allied soldiers during the Korean War being broken like Pavlov’s dogs by Red China’s psychological manipulation wizards. In *Mein Kampf*, Adolf Hitler declared that, “All great movements are popular movements, volcanic eruptions of human passions and emotional sentiments, stirred either by the cruel Goddess of Distress or by the firebrand of word hurled among the masses.”¹⁶ But the word must be framed within the spectacular theater of the sublime. When both Charlie Chaplin and French filmmaker René Clair viewed Leni Riefenstahl’s visual paean to National Socialism, *Triumph of the Will*, at a showing at the New York Museum of Modern Art, Chaplin laughed but Clair was terror-stricken, fearing that if it were shown in the West all might be lost.¹⁷

The Revolutionary Vanguard

“O soldiers of the Islamic State, continue to harvest soldiers,” Baghdadi intones, “erupt volcanoes of jihad everywhere,” and “dismember [enemies] as groups and individuals” to liberate mankind from the “satanic usury-based global system” leached by “the Jews and crusaders”¹⁸—an appeal that resonates with many and stirs at least some to atrocity. Although there has yet to be replication, a recent poll suggests that a quarter of France’s young adults of all creeds, from ages 18 to 24, have at least a “somewhat favorable” attitude towards ISIL. Other research with young people in the hovels and grim housing projects of the Paris *banlieues* found fairly wide tolerance or support for ISIL even among the non-Muslim underclasses.¹⁹

It matters little that, as J.M. Berger wrote in *The Atlantic*, “the Islamic State’s ideological sympathizers make up less than one percent of the world’s population...and the fact that active, voluntary participants in its caliphate project certainly make up less than a tenth of a percent.”²⁰ Few, if any, revolutionary vanguards in history achieved success by first capturing a significant portion of the world’s population, or even the people in their home regions. During the surge of American troops in Iraq, up to three-fourths of the fighters were neutralized in al-Qaeda’s Iraqi affiliate, which would become ISIL, and an average of about a dozen high-value targets were eliminated monthly for 15 consecutive months, including its top leader, Abu Musab al-Zarqawi. Yet, the organization survived and the group went on to thrive beyond all expectations amidst the chaos of Syria’s civil war and Iraq’s factional decomposition.

Just since World War II, revolutionary movements have, on average, emerged victorious with as little as one-tenth of the firepower and manpower of the state forces against them.²¹ Behavioral research in conflict zones indicates that sacred values (e.g., national liberation, God, and Caliphate) mobilized for collective action by devoted actors enables outsized commitment in initially low-power groups (e.g., Viet Cong, ISIL) to resist and often prevail against materially more powerful foes who depend on standard incentives, such as police and armies that rely on pay, promotion, and punishment (e.g., South Vietnamese Army, Iraqi Army).²²

As history and empirical studies show, what has mattered in revolutionary success is commitment to cause and comrades that, even in the face of initial failures and often

devastating defeats, can trump overwhelming material disadvantages.²³ In 1776, American colonists were primarily frustrated not over economics, but over perceived denial of truths “sacred and undeniable”—Thomas Jefferson’s original words for the Declaration of Independence.²⁴ They were willing to sacrifice “our lives, our fortunes, and our sacred honor” against the world’s mightiest military empire. Britain sent the largest naval expeditionary force in the 18th century (30,000 men) against the fledgling American Revolution in New York (20,000 inhabitants), and initially beat Washington’s army to a pulp. At year’s end, revolutionary forces were starving, although it was a bumper crop year. Enlistments in the highly fractious revolutionary army were coming to an end, and its remnants were beginning to return to their homes. Eyewitness reports indicate that Washington saved the incipient republic with an evidently sincere appeal to a higher moral calling: “You will render that service to the cause of liberty which you can probably never do under any other circumstances.”²⁵ And so the army fused together in the harsh winter at Valley Forge, henceforth able to withstand any adversity.

But the sort of liberal democracy initiated by the American Revolution has never been very good at adjudicating across religious and ethnic boundaries, especially when, as in much of the Middle East and Central Asia, such boundaries are tribally based. Democracy took root in Britain’s American colonies, which had the world’s highest standard of living at the time and unprecedented opportunities for people other than Native Americans and African slaves to strike out on their own into virtually limitless territory, relatively free to realize their aspirations.²⁶

In Western Europe, democracy gradually developed during the 19th century under the tutelage of authoritarian rule. France’s Napoleon III not only continued Napoleon Bonaparte’s promotion of cultural secularism and tolerance of religious plurality, but also went on to introduce legislative elections, permit organized political opposition, and legalize the right to strike. In Europe, people were torn from their ancestral lands (under laws closing the commons) to work mostly in urban centers of the industrial revolution, bound in toil and war to a novel, overarching notion of national identity.

In this landscape, liberal institutions began to develop, enabling hitherto anonymous strangers to work with one another and, if necessary, to fight together. These institutions included free and universal education, a press accessible to a wide range of information and argument, equality of all citizens before the law (at least in principle), and a culture of growing tolerance towards minorities and others. Without an overarching national identity and the liberal values and institutions to sustain it, popular choice and elections lead only to a tyranny of the majority, as both ancient Athens and post-Saddam Iraq confirm.

The chasm between the values of the West and those of ISIL and its sympathizers is compounded by alternate historical arcs. The West and the Arab and Muslim worlds have long lived mostly separate and parallel histories. In the West, people generally believe history began with Ancient Sumeria around the 26th century BCE. Centered in the southern part of modern-day Iraq, Sumeria was the birthplace to written law and literature, and to Abraham and his monotheistic creed. Civilization then moved west to Greece and Rome.

After the fall of Rome, came the Middle Ages, the Renaissance, the Industrial Revolution and the Enlightenment, the first political revolutions, the World Wars, and the Cold War. By the end of the 20th century, human rights and democracy became triumphant and seemingly inevitable.

The Arab and Muslim worlds also begin with Sumeria, but until the World Wars, Rome, Greece, and the rest were peripheral. Christian Europe was the “dark continent.” Muslim heroes, myths, legends, and references were all basically different. Indeed, there are Moses, Alexander the Great, and Jesus, but their profiles in Islam are distinct. Musa’s (Moses’) life paralleled Mohammed’s and foretold the Prophet’s coming. Iskandar (Alexander), or Dhul-Qarnayn (Arabic for “The Two-Horned One”), was a religious figure to whom Allah gave great power and the ability to build a wall of civilization to provisionally keep out the forces of chaos and evil. And Isa (Jesus) was Allah’s righteous messenger, not his son, who did not die on the cross but, like Mohammed, was raised to heaven.

All of the European political imports (and even nationalism itself, except maybe for Turkey, Egypt, and Iran, which are still more built around ethnicity and confession than national identity *per se*) have failed, and miserably so. People are yearning for something in their history, in their traditions, with their heroes and their morals. And ISIL, however brutal and repugnant to us and even most in the Arab and Muslim worlds, is speaking directly to that.

Yet, there is little apparent in the response of the U.S. and Western powers that even recognizes that revival. The hackneyed solutions amount to a tired call to shore up the broken nation-state system imposed in the aftermath of World War I by the European victors, Great Britain and France, and a reaffirmation of “moderate Islam,” which appeals to young people’s longings for adventure, glory, ideals, and significance even less than does the promise of eternal shopping malls.

Still, the popular notion of a “clash of civilizations” between Islam and the West—current to many of our own politicians and the public as well as to ISIL and al-Qaeda—is woefully misleading. Violent extremism represents not the resurgence of traditional cultures, but their collapse, as young people unmoored from millennial traditions flail about in search of a social identity that gives personal significance and glory. This is the dark side of globalization. The young radicalize to find a firm identity in a flattened world where vertical lines of communication between the generations are replaced by horizontal peer-to-peer attachments that can span the globe, albeit in informationally narrow and tight ways.

As I testified to the U.S. Senate Armed Service Committee, and before the United Nations Security Council, what inspires the most lethal assailants in the world today is not so much the Quran or religious teachings (although for leadership this is important) as a thrilling cause and call to action that promises glory and esteem in the eyes of friends; through friends, eternal respect and remembrance in the wider world that many will never live to enjoy.²⁷ Foreign volunteers for ISIL are often youth in transitional stages in their lives—immigrants, students, between jobs and before finding their mates, having left their

homes, and looking for new families of friends and fellow travelers to find purpose and significance.

France's Centre for the Prevention of Sectarian Drift Related to Islam estimates that 80 percent come from nonreligious families; West Point's Center for Combating Terrorism finds that their average age is 25.²⁸ For the most part, they have no traditional religious education and are "born again" to religion through the jihad. About one in four, often the fiercest followers, are converts. Research suggests that French converts from families of Christian origin are often the most vociferous of ISIL's defenders. There is something about joining someone else's fight that makes one fierce. A former body builder from Épinay-sur-Seine, a northern suburb of Paris, when asked why he converted to Islam, said that he had been in and out of jail, constantly getting into trouble. "I was a mess, with nothing to me, until the idea of following the *mujahid's* way gave me rules to live by"—to channel his energy into jihad and defend his Muslim brethren under attack from infidels in France and everywhere, "from Palestine to Burma."

Self-seekers who have found their way to jihad reach out through private gatherings or the internet. They might be people who feel uncomfortable with binge drinking or casual sex, or have seen their parents humiliated by employers or the government, or their sisters insulted for wearing a headscarf. Most do not follow through to join the jihad, but some do. More than 80 percent who join ISIL do so through peer-to-peer relationships, mostly with friends and sometimes family.²⁹ Very few join in mosques or through recruitment by anonymous strangers.

What we know about the 2015 Paris attackers, for example, fits this pattern. As with the perpetrators of the 2004 Madrid train bombings and the 2005 London Underground bombings, several of the principal plotters in the January and November Paris attacks lived for a time in the same neighborhood, several enlisted friends and family members, and some moved in the same criminal networks and spent time together in jail.

In France, as elsewhere in Europe, many of these young people identify neither with their country of origin nor their country of domicile. Other identities are weak and nonmotivating. One woman in the Paris suburb of Clichy-sous-Bois told of feeling like a transgender person who opts out of the gender they were assigned to at birth. "I was like a Muslim trapped in a Christian body," believing herself only able to live fully as a Muslim with dignity in the Islamic State.³⁰

Unlike the United States, Europe was not built to absorb immigrants. In America, Muslim immigrants attain parity or surpass the average American in wealth and education in the first generation.³¹ In Europe, they are much more likely to be poorer than the average citizen and poorer still after the second generation, a legacy of decolonization left largely to fester unattended.³²

France and Germany have the largest Muslim populations in Europe. In France, seven to eight percent of the total population is Muslim. At the same time, up to two-thirds of the prison population is Muslim, contributing significantly to an underclass ripe for radicalization.³³ One 24-year-old who joined Jabhat al-Nusra in Syria, described his experience in Germany:

They teach us to work hard to buy a nice car and nice clothes but that isn't happiness. I was a third-class human because I wasn't integrated into a corrupted system. But I didn't want to be a street gangster. So, [my friends and I] decided to go around and invite people to join Islam. The other Muslim groups in the city just talk. They think a true Muslim state will just rain down from heaven on them without fighting.

Most European volunteers join ISIL, rather than Jabhat al-Nusra, because they believe the Caliphate is here today and there is no need to wait for tomorrow. Yet, many ISIL volunteers are far from marginal in their home countries. As one family physician wrote to me earlier this year:

During 2015, two groups of medical students [17 in all] from the University [of Medical Sciences and Technology in Khartoum, Sudan] fled to the Levant in order to join IS. The families of those students have had difficulties coping with their loss. It was almost grievousness of death. The students who left from our university...are well-funded by their parents (higher middle class with multi-background). I find difficulty identifying the factors that led those smart, straight-A students, to [IS]. Could it be lack of identity? Could it be the universities' fault? Could it be...the family's lack of influence?

A banker from Mosul recounted:

Daesh [ISIL] fighters came into the bank and our staff was terrified. They offered to help in any way. An Algerian, about 25, polite, asked only to be led to our computers. In a short time he downloaded all of our bank's transactions. He said that he came to the Islamic State to put his education in computer engineering to good use.

The Caliphate is an attractor to all of these young people, providing purpose and freedom from what they have come to see as the vice of a meaningless, material world. ISIL is supposed to conform to the pure, Salafi vision of the Prophet's initial followers (of the *salaf*, or "forebears"). It is an imperial enterprise that demands offensive jihad, or holy war, against the infidel (*kafir*), as an "individual obligation" (*fard al-'ayn*) of everyone who belongs to the "House of Islam" (*Dar al-Islam*).

Adherents of this pure Caliphate are violently opposed to the idea of greater jihad as an inner spiritual struggle. They consider this bogus notion of jihad to be the heart of the Sufi heresy introduced in the later Abbasid Caliphate, which corrupted the pure Arab-led form of the Caliphate and led to its decay and downfall.

Reviving the Muslim Caliphate, under its original Arab cast, is a powerful attractor to these young people, providing purpose and freedom from what they have come to see as the vice of a material world based on a specious freedom to make only false and meaningless choices. Some speaking for Western governments at the East Asia Summit in Singapore last April argued that the Caliphate is mythology covering traditional power politics. Research with those drawn to the cause show that this is a dangerous misconception. The Caliphate has reemerged as a mobilizing cause in the minds of many Muslims, and even

has some appeal to Muslims who favor interfaith cooperation. “I am against the violence of [al-Qaeda] and ISIL,” an imam, who helps to run an interfaith dialogue initiative with Christians and Jews, in Barcelona told us, “But they have put our predicament in Europe and elsewhere on the map. Before, we were just ignored. And the Caliphate.... We dream of it like the Jews long dreamed of Zion. Maybe it can be a federation, like the European Union, of Muslim peoples. The Caliphate is here, in our hearts, even if we don’t know what real form it will finally take.”

Whatever form it assumes, we can be sure it will be rooted in the history and culture of the Arab states, not the West. That perspective includes the reality of Muslim dominance of middle Eurasia until the European industrial revolution and a rejection of the Western world order, be it liberal democracy or socialism, imposed after the Ottoman Empire’s collapse in the early 20th century.

Perhaps above all else, ISIL aims to put an end to Sykes-Picot, the neocolonial order that Britain and France imposed on the Arab provinces of the Ottoman Empire after the First World War—an order solidified in borders drawn by Churchill, T.E. Lawrence, Gertrude Bell, and others at the Cairo Conference in March 1921, to ensure British control of unfettered lines of communication, resources (especially oil), and transport from Suez to India. In the spring of 2014, when ISIL bulldozed the border markers between Iraq and Syria, it generated shudders of liberation and joy for many across the region and beyond. Unlike the United States and other great powers, including Russia and China, many people in the region do not consider the current mayhem to result from failed states that now must be revived and reinforced at whatever cost, but from the expedient fictions that created those states in the first place.

Revolutions Past and Present

Revolutions past and present are moral events. Deteriorating or rapidly changing economic and social conditions can initiate a cascading series of events that produces a political crisis. However, this will lead to a “revolutionary” challenge to the prevailing order, and the costly commitment to basic political and social change, only when action becomes morally motivated by a shift in core cultural norms, or “sacred values,” and the seizure of state power to enforce those values. Thus, despite the fact that the influence of the Islamic clergy and canon had declined precipitously within Iran’s civil institutions and government under the shah’s regime, the failure of secular forces (from liberal to Marxist-Leninist) to cohere around a new political morality left the way open for Islamic forces to seize the moral high ground. In Egypt, the Muslim Brotherhood’s influence had been on the rise well before the Arab Spring, and although the Brotherhood initially refused to participate, the disunity of secular forces allowed it to rush in and fill the moral void. But unlike the founders of the Islamic Republic of Iran who purged the army, controlled the *bazaari* (the urban commercial class), and took root in the rural religious population, Egypt’s Muslim Brotherhood leadership believed (as Safwat Hegazi, head of the Egyptian Revolutionary Council, stated) that the economy and army would fall

into line if the Islamic leadership first managed to control the messaging and Ministry of Information.

By contrast, ISIL has moved swiftly and ruthlessly to impose a new-old ethos among Arab Sunnis in the war-torn wastelands of the Middle East. It promises total war against the “satanic” morality of Iran and the Shia and their helpers (including America, its allies, and Russia) in a mortal struggle for the Muslim soul and ultimately for the salvation of all humankind.

Historical analogies are always of limited usefulness, but they are also one of the only means by which we can make sense of what is new, or at least recognize where true novelty begins. There are striking historical parallels in the history of modern revolutions ever since the Jacobin faction of French revolutionaries, led by Maximilien Robespierre, introduced the political concept of terror and decapitation by guillotine as an extreme measure for the defense of democracy and Republican virtue. These were a divine form of violence “supported by the most sound [sic] and wholesome of all laws, the salvation of the people.” For a decade, at the end of the 18th century, the French Revolution consumed its own like bloodied sharks, all the while fighting a fractious coalition of great powers that sought to destroy it.³⁴ Yet, it thrived. United and transformed into an imperial mission to reform and save humankind—as all revolutions since have endeavored to do—revolutionary forces conquered nearly all of Europe before the Empire’s fall. And ever after, revolutionary commitment to “total war” in the service of some indomitable moral and spiritual force has continued to inspire nearly all revolutions.

The current rivalry between al-Qaeda and ISIL echoes that between the anarchists and social revolutionaries versus the Bolsheviks in the early 20th century. Beginning in Russia in the 1870s as a countercultural agitation against the power of the state and capital, the anarchist and social revolutionary movements soon spread throughout Europe and on to the Americas. Between 1881 and 1900, assassins closely linked to the anarchist and social revolutionary movements had killed the czar of Russia, the president of France, the prime minister of Spain, the king of Italy, and the empress of Austria. In September 1901, the anarchist Leon Czolgosz assassinated the U.S. President William McKinley.

The Great Powers considered anarchism to pose the greatest threat to the internal political and economic order, and to international stability. America beefed up the Secret Service and created the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI). Britain’s Scotland Yard, Russia’s Okhrana (forerunner of the NKVD and KGB), and France’s *La Brigade spéciale des Renseignements généraux* were all formed largely to meet the anarchist threat. In the face of repeated anarchist attacks randomly targeting Parisians in “bourgeois” cafés, theaters, and the like, French leaders and the popular press repeatedly demanded that the French people “awaken” and “unify” to fight a scourge that threatened civilization itself (while confounding the many currents of anarchism, including the many peaceful and communitarian strands of the multidimensional movement).³⁵ The political (and to some extent, social and economic) consequences from this first wave of modern terror were similar in many respects to those of the 9/11 attacks. Teddy Roosevelt made the

defeat of anarchism an overriding mission of his administration. “When compared with the suppression of anarchy, every other question sinks into insignificance. The anarchist is the enemy of humanity, the enemy of all mankind; and his is a deeper degree of criminality than any other.”³⁶

But Roosevelt did not restrict the fight against terrorism to anarchists alone. He expanded the war on anarchy into an imperial mission to intervene in any country around the world if necessary to protect it from foreign evil and preserve it from chaos. “Chronic wrongdoing,” he said, “or an impotence which results in a general loosening of the ties of civilized society, may in America, as elsewhere, ultimately require intervention by some civilized nation, and may lead the United States, however reluctantly, in flagrant cases of such wrongdoing or impotence, to the exercise of an international police power.”³⁷ Most tellingly, the war against anarchy and terror helped to justify the brutal repression of an ethnic Muslim (Moro) insurgency against U.S. rule in the Philippines.

Despite political and popular belief in the existence of an “Anarchist Central,” there never really was anything of the sort. As with al-Qaeda, the anarchist movement was largely a decentralized movement of volunteers led by fairly well-off and well-educated folk. What ultimately killed off the anarchist movement as a geopolitical force were not the armies and police of the Great Powers, but the Bolsheviks. They knew much better how to manage a somewhat shared political ambition through military and territorial management. They were also, on the whole, much more ruthless.

In a series of interviews with Jabhat al-Nusra fighters from the Aleppo and Dara regions of Syria, it has become increasingly evident that, in the words of a former ISIL imam whom we interviewed in Jordan, “Daesh (ISIL) is eating Qaeda” in much the same way that the Bolsheviks co-opted and practically annihilated the anarchist movement. Even some Jabhat al-Nusra fighters echoed this imam’s sentiment, conceding that ISIL is better led, organized, supplied, rooted in territory, more uncompromising, and brutal in action. “Daesh [ISIL] has taken our power and financial resources from us, their media is more powerful, their military commanders are more efficient, and so we are like a fish out of water (*tatakhet*).”

Opponents of Germany’s National Socialist Workers (Nazi) Party argued that the Nazis were neither a party of workers nor socialists. Today, we are told again and again that ISIL is “neither a State nor Islamic” (at least I am, nearly every time I talk to political or religious leaders), and that using the term “Islamic State” only “feeds into its hands.” In fact, the contrary is true: believing that refusing to call the Islamic State by its own name can somehow delegitimize it is only self-deluding (a rose, or a National Socialist, by any other name is still what or who it is).

In fact, there is a deeper connection between the Nazi movement and ISIL, an association that I noted some time ago.³⁸ George Orwell, in his review of *Mein Kampf* in 1940, describes the essence of the problem:

Hitler knows...that human beings *don't* only want comfort, safety, short working-hours, hygiene...and, in general, common sense; they also, at least intermittently, want struggle

and self-sacrifice.... Whereas Socialism, and even capitalism in a more grudging way, have said to people ‘I offer you a good time,’ Hitler has said to them ‘I offer you struggle, danger and death,’ and as a result a whole nation flings itself at his feet.³⁹

Man for man, the German army outfought all Allied armies by any measure. In classical military doctrine about a 30 percent loss in a fighting unit usually leads to entropy, so when that degree of destruction is confirmed, the victorious army moves on to the next task (this was basically how the Israeli Army fought the Six-Day War). But German forces often suffered in excess of 50 percent loss and still held fast, fought bravely—and sometimes knowingly—to the death, in defense of a devoutly believed cause, however horrible it may seem (as for example, in the Waffen-SS volunteer “death squads” that fought to the end against the Soviets in Budapest).

Postwar social psychological studies reveal that the German soldier believed in what he was doing, and fought for a cause as much as for comrades, whereas there is little evidence that the Allies fought for democracy or communism, despite Hollywood and Soviet propaganda.⁴⁰ The German armies were destroyed only by the massive superiority of American firepower and by the massive manpower of more than 20 million Russians given over to slaughter. Perhaps it will come to something like that with ISIL, when and if ISIL is ever perceived to be a true existential threat. But for now, the means arrayed against this dynamic revolutionary movement look feeble and what the U.S. government grandly dubs the “global ISIL coalition” of 65 nations seems a very tenuous, if not fatuous, thing (with several of its members ever-ready to stick knives into one another’s backs).⁴¹

Over the course of the 20th century, America and its allies used three different strategies to meet the great international threats of the day:

1. First came general policing, at home and abroad, to meet the anarchist menace. This had only very modest and intermittent success until it was overtaken and subdued by a more potent revolutionary movement, Bolshevism.
2. Then, “total war” was waged against the Axis powers. That succeeded because of America’s massive productive capacity, the Allies’ overwhelming manpower, the fact that the Axis had clearly targetable industrial infrastructures and political hierarchies that could be destroyed, and strong national identities that could be mobilized to rapidly rebuild under the victors’ different yet familiar value systems.
3. Lastly, a two-fold strategy of “containment” was employed against the military and political challenge posed by the Soviet Union and its confederates. For Paul Nitze, head of President Truman’s Policy Planning Staff, containment principally involved measures placing greater emphasis on strengthening our own military capabilities, rather than relying on extensive economic assistance and military aid to our allies.⁴² Although for Nitze’s successor, George Kennan, measures involving “adroit and vigilant application of counter-force at a series of constantly shifting geographical and political points, corresponding to the shifts and maneuvers of Soviet policy” were critical, political countermeasures were paramount. These involved both economic assistance (e.g., the Marshall Plan) and “psychological warfare” (overt propaganda and covert operations) to counter the spread of Soviet influence until the

“internal contradictions” of the Soviet political economy compelled collapse.⁴³ In the end, containment seemed to work, although considerable debate remains over the relative importance of the different countermeasures.

Recent calls to counter al-Qaeda and now ISIL first focused on general policing, then moved to containment. Now there are calls for total war (at least among some of the leading presidential candidates). But total war is hardly more likely to succeed than general policing or containment against a global jihadi archipelago because of its lack of the very conditions that fostered Allied success against the Axis powers (i.e., strong industrial base, national identity, familiarity with victors’ values, etc.). What we need, it appears, is a new military, political, and psychological strategy that targets the peculiarly novel features of the ISIL Revolution (i.e., dispersed infrastructure, confessional and tribal allegiances, wholly different values, etc.).

The United States and its allies may yet opt for force of arms, with all of the unforeseen and unintended consequences that are likely to result from all-out war. But even if ISIL is destroyed in its core lands—and even if we were to do something serious about ISIL’s growth in Africa across areas totaling millions of square miles—its message could still captivate many in coming generations and in disparate regions. Empowering and ennobling the legions of Muslims opposed to ISIL, including Islamists who reject democracy but who can coexist with democracies, is likely a better bet. Unfortunately, nothing today in the Muslim world competes with ISIL’s voice and strength. Nearly everyone is either for it or against, and though overwhelmingly against, as advertising wisdom has it, a lot of bad publicity for one side still beats little or none for another.

“Will to Fight”: Sacred Values, Identity Fusion, and Spiritual Formidability

One 25-year-old Jabhat al-Nusra fighter who originally joined ISIL but tired of “blowing up innocent civilians” describes a fairly general path to “the Syrian Revolution which has turned to jihad” as a desire for struggle and self-sacrifice more than anything in life:

As a teen I just wanted to play football and video games. I used to love reading fiction books. Looking back on my thoughts it seems that my mind was too focused and distracted by the mundane: studying, getting a good job, socializing, having fun and being a family man. The concept of Jihad was something scary at the time, something of sacrifice and hardship and impossible to pull off. It wasn’t long before I was informed about the concept of martyrdom (*shohada*).... Immediately my mind would conjure images of two armies fighting each other on an open plane. Warriors wielding their swords and riding along on beautiful horses, my mind in overdrive with thoughts of fighting in the way of Allah and attaining martyrdom. I never really watched much jihadi propaganda online and I was so eager to get to Syria I walked in Blind with two brothers I was with, who were locals from the UK...[to] rid society of its many filths and return the earth to a state of purity where the law of God is supreme and surpasses everything else, jealous about brothers who had been killed fighting in the way of Allah.

Of course, wars are won in the material world, but a spiritual commitment to cause and comrades conveys great advantage, all things being equal. As 14th-century Arab historian Ibn Khaldūn first noted, comparing Muslim dynasties in North Africa with similar military might, long-term differences in success “have their origin in religion...group feeling (*asabiyah*) [wherein] individual desires come together in agreement [and] mutual cooperation and support flourish.”

In September 2014, President Obama endorsed the judgment of National Intelligence Director James Clapper: “We underestimated the Viet Cong...we underestimated ISIL and overestimated the fighting capability of the Iraqi [A]rmy.... It boils down to predicting the will to fight, which is an imponderable.”⁴⁴ In fact, predicting who is willing to fight and who is not, and why, is ponderable and amenable to scientific study.

Recent interviews and psychological experiments on the frontlines with Kurdish fighters of the Peshmerga and the Kurdistan Workers’ Party, with captured ISIL fighters, and with Jabhat al-Nusra fighters in Syria provide a good initial indication of willingness to fight. Two principal factors interact to predict readiness to make costly sacrifices (e.g., going to prison, fight, die, have one’s family suffer, etc.).

The first factor is perception of relative commitment of one’s own group versus those of the enemy to a sacred cause. This can be measured through behavioral experiments and tracked via neural imaging to show four elements.⁴⁵

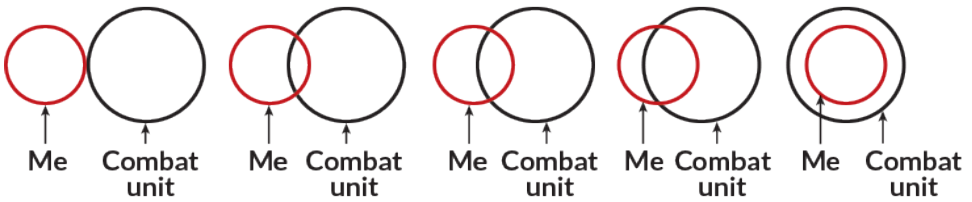
1. Disregard for material incentives or disincentives: attempts to buy people off from their cause (“carrots”) or punish them for embracing it through sanctions (“sticks”) do not work, and even tend to backfire.
2. Blindness to exit strategies: people cannot even conceive of the possibility of abandoning their sacred values or relaxing their commitment to the cause. This fosters unconditional cooperation and intractable conflict in ways that social contracts born of shared convenience and utility do not.
3. Immunity to social pressure: it matters not how many people oppose your sacred values, or how close to you they are in other matters. Such values are not social or cultural norms but defining and circumscribing features of culture itself. They provide the moral frame for which social interactions and material exchanges are permissible or taboo.
4. Insensitivity to discounting: according to most economic and political theory, and usual in most everyday affairs, distant events and objects have less significance for people than things in the here and now. But matters associated with sacred values, regardless of how far removed in time or space, are more important and motivating than mundane concerns, however immediate.

The second factor in predicting willingness to fight is the degree of fusion with one’s comrades. Consider, by way of illustration, a pair of circles where one circle represents “me” and a larger circle represents “the group” (see Figure 3.2). In one set of experiments, participants were asked to consider five possible pairings: in the first pairing, the “me” circle and “the group” circle do not touch; in the second pairing, the circles touch; in the third, they slightly overlap; in the fourth, they half overlap; and in the fifth pairing, the

“me” circle is entirely contained within “the group” circle. People who choose the last pairing think and behave in ways entirely different from those who choose any of the other pairings. They experience what social psychologists call “identity fusion,” wedding their personal identity (“who I am”) to a unique collective identity (“who we are”). Such total fusion demonstrably leads to a sense of group invincibility and a willingness of each and every individual in the group to sacrifice for each and every other.⁴⁶

The following diagram consists of two circles measuring identify fusion. The small circle represents you (I) and the big circle represents your close circle of friends/religion/country (here, ISIL). Those individuals that are fused (far right) indicate that the group and the individual become one and measures of willingness to commit costly sacrifices are dichotomous with all other fusion pairings.

Figure 3.2. Fusion Measure



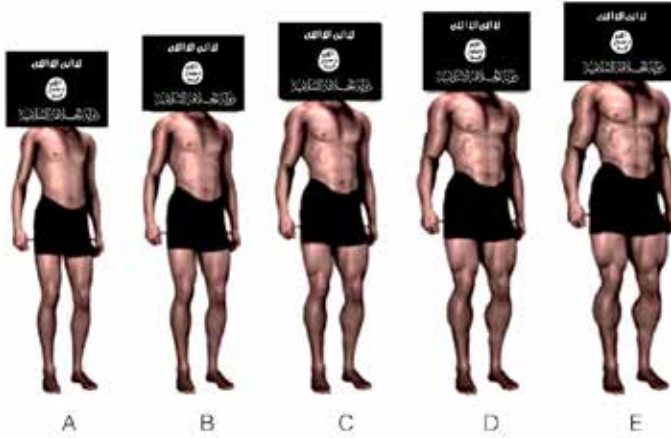
(Example: Individual/IS)

Only among the Kurds do we find commitment to the sacred cause of “Kurdeity” (their own term) and fusion with fellow Kurdish fighters comparable to commitment to cause and comrade among ISIL fighters.⁴⁷

Willingness to fight and make costly sacrifices is also strongly associated with perceptions of physical formidability on the battlefield and, even more importantly, with spiritual strength (see Figure 3.3). Research indicates that Jabhat al-Nusra fighters consider Iran (by which, they also mean Hezbollah) to be the most formidable foe in Syria, both in terms of physical and spiritual strength, but they consider ISIL growing to parity on both scores. These al-Qaeda combatants consider the United States to be of middling formidability, and the Syrian and Iraqi Armies to be relatively weak physically, and spiritually worthless; and thus, an inconsequential enemy in the long run (see Figure 3.4). Such perceptions appear to correspond to performance and results on the battlefield.

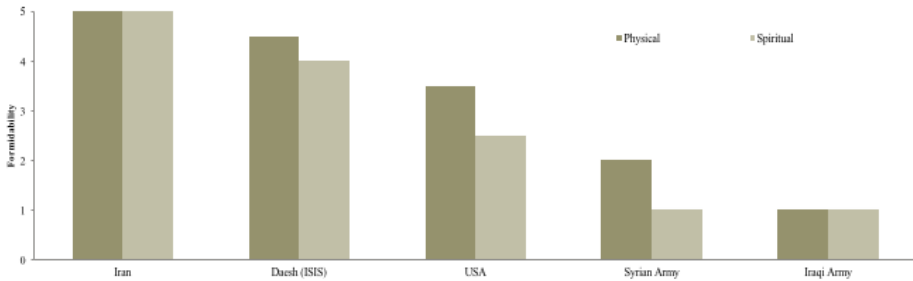
Figure 3.3. Formidability Measure

(Example: Individual/ISIL)



Here is a series of human bodies that represent the strength of one group (e.g., ISIL). You can choose one representative body to indicate the size and strength of the group as a whole. This holds constant for measures of physical strength and spiritual strength.

Figure 3.4. Perception of Physical vs. Spiritual Formidability by Jabhat al-Nusra Fighters



To be sure, not all who fight with ISIL are committed zealots. Captured ISIL fighters recounted growing up in the failed Iraqi state during the last decade: a hellish world of guerrilla war, disrupted families, constant fear, and utter lack of hope. They see Iran and the Shi'ites as their greatest enemies, but they also believe that America allowed them to oppress the Arab Sunni minority for the sake of majority rule. When prisoners were asked, "What is Islam?" they answered, "my life." Yet, it was clear that they knew little about the Quran, or Islamic history, other than what they had heard from al-Qaeda and ISIL propaganda. They could neither cite passages from the Quran relevant to their actions nor

even name the first four Caliphs and companions of the Prophet who founded Islam's first Empire. For them, the cause of religion was fused with the vision of a caliphate—a joining of political and religious rule—that kills or subjugates any nonbeliever (but which in the face of almost sure execution by the Kurds, they were ready to recant).

In one conversation picked up by a Kurdish walkie-talkie, a fighter with a local accent asked for help: “My brother has been killed. I am surrounded. Help me take his body away.” The reply: “Perfect, you will join him soon in Paradise.” The fighter retorted: “Come for me. This Paradise, I don't want.” The Islamic State will say to a local sheikh: “Give us 20 young men or we loot your village.” To a father with three sons, they will say: “Give us one or we take your daughter as a bride for our men.” (One young girl we were told of, who came from a village near Mosul Dam, was “wed” for this reason 15 times in in a single night.)

In the face of such brutality, wavering ISIL supporters could well rally to an Arab Sunni force, possibly allied with the Kurds who fight with remarkable strength of spirit—although this was not initially the case—but with the barest of means. Despite suffering almost nightly grenade attacks and suicide assaults via steel-plated vehicles, few Kurdish frontline units had night vision goggles (or even binoculars) or armor-piercing weapons.

Nevertheless, it is foreign fighters that the Kurds most fear. As the chief of the Kirkuk police station housing the prisoners puts it, “the foreign fighters are the most dangerous and fearless. They fight to win and they fight to die. They believe in what they are doing and will not surrender.”

Revolutionary Strategy and the Headless Tiger

ISIL's core strategy is not a mystery, although surprisingly few people engaged in policy and decisionmaking with regard to ISIL pay heed, preferring more familiar paradigms, of power politics and war as simply politics by other means. Think of reactions to the horrors of Paris, Ankara, Beirut, or Bamako, and then consider the following axioms drawn from *The Management of Chaos-Savagery* (Idarat at-Tawahoush, required reading for every ISIL political, religious, military leader, or amir), and from the February 2015 editorial in *Dabiq* (the online ISIL publication), on “The Extinction of the Gray Zone.”⁴⁸ ISIL's actions have been, and likely will continue to be, consistent with these axioms:

- Work to expose the weakness of the so-called Great Powers by pushing them to abandon the media psychological war and war by proxy until they fight directly.
- Draw these powers into military conflict. Seek the confrontations that will bring them to fight in our regions on our terms.
- Diversify the strikes and attack soft targets—tourist areas, eating places, places of entertainment, sports events, and so forth—that cannot possibly be defended everywhere. Disperse the infidels' resources and drain them to the greatest extent possible, and so undermine people's faith in the ability of their governments to provide security, most basic of all state functions.
- Target the young, and especially the disaffected, who tend to rebel against authority, are eager for self-sacrifice, and are filled with idealism; and let inert organizations and their leaders foolishly preach moderation.

- Motivate the masses to fly to regions that we manage, by eliminating the “Gray Zone” between the true believer and the infidel, which most people, including most Muslims, currently inhabit. Use so-called “terror attacks” to help Muslims realize that non-Muslims hate Islam and want to harm all who practice it, to show that peacefulness gains Muslims nothing but pain.
- Use social media to inspire sympathizers abroad to violence. Communicate the message: Do what you can, with whatever you have, wherever you are, whenever possible.
- Pay attention to what works to hold the interest of people, especially youth, in the lands of the Infidel (e.g., television ratings, box office receipts, music and video charts), and use what works as templates to carry our righteous messages and calls to action under the black banner.

Thus, the 2015 Paris and 2016 Brussels attacks, for example, did not represent a “game change” in ISIL’s strategy, or even tactics, contrary to statements by U.S. leaders, senior intelligence officials, and the *New York Times*.⁴⁹ In reality, the attacks were just an ever more effective installment for fomenting chaos in Europe, just as attacks in Turkey and Lebanon sought to instigate more savagery and chaos in the Middle East. A welcome to refugees would clearly represent a winning response to this strategy, whereas wholesale rejection of refugees just as clearly represents a losing response to ISIL. We may wish to celebrate diversity and tolerance in the gray zone, but the general trend in Europe and the majority segment of America’s political establishment and population is to collude in erasing it.

There is a disheartening dynamic between the rise of radical Islamism and the revival of the xenophobic ethno-nationalist movements that are beginning to seriously undermine the middle class—the mainstay of stability and democracy—in Europe, in ways reminiscent of the hatchet job that the communists and fascists did on European democracy in the 1920s and 1930s. The fact is Europe’s replacement rate is less than 1.6 children per couple and so needs considerable immigration to maintain a productive workforce that can sustain the middle class standard of living.⁵⁰ This is at a time where there has never been less tolerance for immigration, creating a situation of chaos that ISIL is effectively exploiting.⁵¹

In areas under ISIL control, or adjacent to it, the general populations likely do not support either ISIL or the Western- (and now also Russian-) dominated forces arrayed against it. They are not zealots nor samurai, and do not want to die as martyrs. ISIL knows this and entices its enemies to attack the population centers that it controls, even though the ability of ISIL to diffuse its highly mobile military assets and personnel in a regime without borders means that there is little infrastructure available to target. Mostly, the local populations suffer. Although many would flee from both ISIL and the bombs of its enemies if given half a chance, they cannot move and must exclusively depend for protection on the black banner, where evidence of gray can be punished with death. And history shows that aerial bombing campaigns generally harden populations against the bombers, whatever the regime.

In the West, the imminent death of ISIL has been greatly oversold. ISIL is destined to fail on its own, in part because it is a “desperately poor nation trying to fight a three-front war,” in part because of a noxious ideology of governance, as two professors recently argued in *Politico*.⁵² The authors invoke the doomed destiny of the current Zimbabwe state and the collapse of the Soviet Union to bolster their argument.

However, historical precedent and present evidence do not support their point of view. Poverty, multifront wars, and extreme or exclusive ideologies can also end in revolutionary triumph or lasting influence, as with Republican France and possibly the Islamic Republic of Iran. The authors’ contention that, “as the Soviet Union was to communism, so ISIL is to jihadism” might be on the mark.⁵³ However, before ISIL’s inherent contradictions confine it to the dustbin of history, there are likely miles and miles of grief to go. Before the revolutionary flame burns itself out, it can also burn away much in its path, and profoundly reshape the region and beyond.

The 9/11 attacks cost between \$400,000 and \$500,000. According to Brown University’s “Cost of War Project,” the response by the United States alone is 10 to 100 million times that figure, including related security arrangements and military actions that make up the vast bulk of that spending.⁵⁴ On a strictly cost-benefit basis, this violent movement has been wildly successful, beyond even bin Laden’s original imagination, and is increasingly so. Herein lies the full measure of jujitsu-style asymmetric warfare. After all, who could claim that we are better off than before or that the overall danger declines rather than rises?

This alone should inspire a radical change in our own counterstrategies. Yet, in keeping with the proverbial notion of insanity as repeating the same mistakes and expecting different results, the West continues to focus almost exclusively on security and military responses to the violent consequences of other’s actions, with all of the unforeseen, unintended, and uncontrollable consequences that can result from war. Some of these repeated responses have proven almost hopelessly ineffective from the get-go, such as relying on the Iraqi, Afghan, or Free Syrian Armies. By contrast, there is precious little attention to the social and psychological causes that are likely to reassert themselves ever more vehemently unless we address them in serious, concrete ways. In brief, we are wastefully reactive, and incompetently proactive.

In contrast with, say, the off-target tweets of the U.S. State Department’s “Think Again Turn Away” campaign, ISIL may spend hundreds of hours trying to enlist single individuals, to learn how their personal frustrations and grievances can fit into a universal theme of persecution against all Muslims, and thus translate anger and unrealized aspiration into moral outrage. To pass their message, ISIL employs some 50,000 Twitter accounts, with about 1,000 followers each. ISIL also pays close attention to the pop songs, video clips, action movies, and television shows that garner high ratings among youth, and uses them as templates to tailor their own messages.

Any serious engagement must be attuned to individuals and their networks, not to mass marketing of repetitive messages. Young people empathize with each other; they generally do not lecture at one another. From Syria, a young woman messages another:

I know how hard it is to leave behind the mother and father you love, and not tell them until you are here, that you will always love them but that you were put on this earth to do more than be with or honor your parents. I know this will probably be the hardest thing you may ever have to do, but let me help you explain it to yourself and to them.

Yet, the U.S. government has few operatives who personally engage with youth before they become a problem. The FBI is pressing to get out of the messy business of prevention to focus on criminal investigation. “No one wants to own any of this,” one group from the U.S. National Counterterrorism Center recently confided to us. And public diplomacy efforts do not quite get that hackneyed appeals to “moderation” fall flat on restless and idealistic youth seeking adventure, glory, and significance. As the imam and former ISIL recruiter in Jordan states:

The young who came to us were not to be lectured at like witless children; they are for the most part understanding and compassionate, but misguided. We have to give them a better message, but a positive one to compete. Otherwise, they will be lost to Daesh [ISIL].

Without universal appeal, and quality individual time, little progress can be made beyond what is achievable by force of arms. Local grassroots approaches have had better luck in pulling people away. The United Network of Young Peacebuilders has had remarkable results in convincing young Taliban in Pakistan that enemies can be friends, and then encouraging those so convinced to convince others.⁵⁵ But this will not challenge the broad attraction of ISIL for young people from nearly 100 nations and every walk of life. The lessons of local successes must be shared with governments, and ideas allowed to bubble up before they boil over.

To date, no such platform exists. Young people with good ideas have no really good institutional channels to develop them: their often naive demands such as “governments must do this or that”—so apparent at the summer 2015 UN-sponsored Global Forum on Youth in Amman—are dismissed out of hand by people in government, who have to deal with real world constraints on power and its exercise, and the youth are left in the lurch with their ideas unrealized and unrealizable for lack of practical guidance and refinement.

Even if good ideas find ways to emerge from youths and obtain institutional support for their development to application, they still need intellectual help to persuade the public to adopt them. But where are the public intellectuals to do this? In the Muslim world, we see PowerPoint presentations intoning on “dimensions of ideology, grievance, and group dynamics,” notions that originate exclusively with Western “terrorism experts” and think tanks. When asked, “What ideas come from your own people?” we are told in moments of candor, as I was most recently informed by a Muslim leadership council in Singapore, that, “We don’t have many new ideas and we can’t agree on those we have.”

And where among our own current or coming generation are the intellectuals who might influence the moral principles, motivations and actions of society towards a just and

reasonable way through the morass? In academia, you will find few willing to engage with power. Thus, they render themselves irrelevant and morally irresponsible by leaving the field of power entirely to those they censure. Accordingly, politicians pay them little heed, and the public could not care less, often with good reason. For example, in the immediate aftermath of the 9/11 attacks, many in the field of anthropology principally occupied themselves with the critique of empire: is the United States a classic empire or “empire light?” This was arguably a justifiable academic exercise, and perhaps a useful reflection in the long run, but hardly helpful in the context of a country moving fast to open-ended war, with all the agony and suffering that extended wars inevitably bring.

Responsible intellectual endeavor in the public sphere was once a vibrant part of our public life: not to promote “certain, clear, and strong” action, as Martin Heidegger writes in support of Hitler, but to generate just and reasonable possibilities and pathways for consideration. Now this sphere is largely abandoned to the Manichean preaching of blogging pundits, radio talk show hosts, product-pushing podcasters, and television evangelicals. These people rarely do what responsible intellectuals ought to do. “The intellectual,” explained France’s Raymond Aron 60 years ago, “must try never to forget the arguments of the adversary, or the uncertainty of the future, or the faults of one’s own side, or the underlying fraternity of ordinary men everywhere.”⁵⁶

Awe of God and its myriad representations in art and ritual was once the West’s sublime, followed by the violent struggle for liberty and equality. Civilizations rise and fall on the vitality of their cultural ideals, not their material assets alone. History shows that most societies have sacred values for which their people would passionately fight, as “devoted (rather than principally rational) actors,” risking serious loss and even death rather than compromise.⁵⁷ Research suggests this is for many who join ISIL, and for many Kurds who oppose them on the frontlines.⁵⁸ But, so far, we find no comparable willingness among the majority of youths that we sample in Western democracies. With the defeat of fascism and communism, have their lives defaulted to the quest for comfort and safety? Is this enough to ensure the survival, much less triumph, of values we have come to take for granted, on which we believe our world is based? More than the threat from violent jihadis, this might be the key existential issue for open societies today.

Notes

¹ The Islamic State has evolved over recent years, adopting at various times, or being given, different names and acronyms. Throughout this chapter, I will refer to the Islamic State, IS, and ISIS, as ISIL.

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