



After Paris: why ISIL is (also) a cult

by Florence Gaub

The terrorist atrocities in Paris have once again demonstrated the zeal and resolve of the jihadists fighting for the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL). The scale of the violence shows the extent to which the group brainwashes its members – to the point where mass murder and self-annihilation become not only logical, but desirable.

In this sense, ISIL is not only a terrorist organisation with ambitions to become a state, but also an exclusive, authoritarian, religious cult. It is its cultish belief system which allows the group to recruit and retain members from across the globe, excel on the battlefield and inspire franchises to form elsewhere. Consequently, if ISIL is to be tackled, it needs to be fought as a cult, too.

What's a cult?

Both cults and religions are chiefly concerned with explaining the cause and nature of the universe and espouse some form of moral code. They differ greatly, however, in how they treat their members. Religions – and sects, which are small religious groupings – are usually shaped by or adapted to the local cultural context, their members are (more or less) free to choose the extent to which they practise their faith, and funds raised by the institution are expected to contribute to the greater good of the community.

Cults, however, are overzealous or absolute with regard to their ideology, their (usually self-appointed)

leader, and their practices – and are not open to discussion. In the pursuit of complete psychological control, cults adopt an authoritarian or indeed totalitarian stance towards both their members and critics. Their powers of coercion have also grown stronger since the 1960s and 1970s, largely thanks to psychological experimenting techniques.

The brainwashing: how it works

In order to successfully initiate a new member, a cult must first of all remove all traces of individuality. 'Thought reform' programmes and other brainwashing techniques are used to indoctrinate individuals to the point where independent thinking is near impossible. This style of manipulation hinders freedom of choice, and purposefully makes use of a range of emotions such as guilt, fear, pride or shame. Emotional dependency is then created by undermining relationships with family and friends, regulating access to sex or exposing new recruits to unfamiliar environments – like Syria or Iraq, for instance.

ISIL, like most cults, reinforces this sense of isolation through ritualistic (and sometimes degrading) tasks or physical punishments. Individual will is then further broken by introducing (often random) rules to which the members must adhere at all cost. ISIL, for example dictates the appearance of those it governs: women are obliged wear a full-faced veil and an *abaya* in public, while men must grow a beard of a certain length. Prayer times are

enforced at gun point, and social norms – such as the banning of alcohol, tobacco, ‘scandalous’ music – are imposed on pain of death or corporal punishment.

Amidst this climate of repression, cults instil a sense of elitism in their members: they are a chosen people, tasked with saving and transforming humanity. ISIL is apocalyptic and claims to possess knowledge of the imminent end of days – for which only its adherents will be prepared. Moreover, the narrative it weaves of bravely standing alone against numerous ‘non-believers’ cultivates a strong siege mentality among its members.

The logic of violence

In contrast to religions, a cult’s leadership is not accountable to *any* higher authority. In fact, achieving its exalted ends always justifies whatever means are employed – including acts which cult members may have previously considered unethical. The extreme violence meted out by ISIL’s fighters – often under the influence of drugs – seeks to reinforce the group’s internal cohesion: not only does it deter resistance, it also makes a return to pre-ISIL life for the perpetrators practically impossible.

Committing suicide at the behest of a cult is not uncommon and the numbers can be staggering: nearly 1,000 people killed themselves in 1978 for the Peoples Temple in Guyana, and a similar number perished in 2000 for the Movement for the Restoration of the Ten Commandments of God in Uganda. Although killing oneself in return for a tactical victory appears counterintuitive (certainly within the logic of Western warfare), ISIL makes skilled use of suicide bombers for military purposes. It achieves this only because it first manages to brainwash its members to a point of no return.

The recruitment methods

All cults have fairly sophisticated recruitment systems and employ a mix of indoctrination and mind-control methods. Here, ISIL is no exception: it has managed to roughly double its membership since the summer of 2014 to around 40,000–50,000. Broadly speaking, ISIL relies on two ways to enrol members from outside territories under its control: targeted approaches on social media, and personal contacts, usually through friends.

Irrespective of age, alienated individuals estranged from their families and/or societies are the ideal targets for any cult. ISIL is particularly adept at identifying individuals vulnerable to indoctrination, namely those in a transitional phase of life. This

could be following a divorce, a move, a change or loss of job – and explains the broad backgrounds of ISIL’s foreign fighters, or indeed cult members more generally. Once contact is established, ISIL recruiters propagate a narrative of change, utopia, hope, connectivity and abundance to lure in individuals.

People join cults because they offer the prospects of friendship, connection, identity, and an opportunity to make a difference. Cults are also appealing because they give predictability and structure to life through their formulaic norms, and offer simple moral explanations for how to discern right from wrong. In this regard, ISIL’s appeal is deeply psychological rather than political or theological.

It is worth noting that ISIL’s recruitment rates are average by cult standards: Scientology is said to have 50,000 members, the UFO cult Raelism 60,000 adherents, and the Korean Unification Church an estimated 200,000. In the past, the Ku Klux Klan had nearly 4 million members at its peak in the 1920s and Aum Shinrikyo, the group which released sarin gas into Tokyo’s subway system in 1995, had 40,000 followers worldwide.

Getting out of ISIL

The totalitarian nature of cults usually means that a life outside the cult is unimaginable for their most ardent believers. This is, in part, because any attempt to leave the group is met with harsh reprisals. In the case of ISIL, defection is punishable by death for men and by 60 lashes for women. More importantly, ISIL’s foreign members are indoctrinated to the extent whereby their original lives back home are void of meaning. And even if they do manage to return, they will likely be shunned because of the violent acts they have committed or face imprisonment.

As with other cults, prevention is therefore better than cure. Families are key in this process, and hotlines such as the one opened by France can assist them in detecting and countering radicalisation at an early stage. Travel bans to Syria can halt radicalisation to a limited extent as the brainwashing process is even more intense in ISIL-controlled territory. Profiling is arguably less useful, however, due to the wide range of backgrounds of volunteers.

Given that ISIL is not first and foremost a political entity, it cannot be fought with political or military measures alone. The battle against the group is, ultimately, a psychological endeavour.

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