The socialpsychology of Islamist terror – interdisciplinary perspectives on violence and ISIS totalitarian structures

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**ABSTRACT**

The number of potential Islamist perpetrators and supporters has been rising worldwide since the beginning of ISIS in 2014. Despite its military defeat in 2017, ISIS remains a serious threat. How come that numerous people join ISIS and allow the organisation to motivate them to participate in cruel and inhuman acts, such as mass-kilings, within a very short period of time? This article offers socio-psychological explanations, as such processes as dehumanisation and role distance and the perception of a collective humiliation as well as structural and personal violence in the Middle East to answer this question. In connection to that, the authors argue that ISIS targetly addresses the psychological needs resulting from the social and political contexts in which the recruits live by having constricted a distinct totalitarian ideology based on a very selective reading of religious narratives from Islam. Identifying religious elements from Islam as means for a particular purpose and not as the actual focus, the authors emphasise that ISIS has not lived another version of Islam but constructed a distinct ideology, which becomes manifest in strong internal social hierarchies, the genocide of minority groups and a dissemination of this mentality which is independent of a centralised organisation. Future studies must examine these observations and focus on the questions whether this mentality spread by ISIS changes the societies from which people are recruited and, if so, in which way this change becomes evident.

Introduction

After ISIS had lost its 'Islamic State' in Iraq and Syria in 2017 and after its leader Al-Bagdadi had been killed, ISIS was believed to be defeated. Yet, Islamist terror motivated by ISIS-ideas continuously occurs in various countries. Instead of centrally planning large-scale attacks that are logistically complex, ISIS draws on a targeted propaganda and recruitment. Using Islamic elements and terminology, ISIS has developed a totalitarian ideology whose dissemination has become mostly independent of a centralised organisation (Abedin, 2019). In this way, the ideology has taken root in parts of those societies from which ISIS has recruited supporters. The ideology has millions of followers and is beginning to replace the former dictators in Iraq and Syria. This is also being attempted in other countries in North Africa and Asia (Maskur, 2018; Warner & Hulme, 2018; Yasin, 2015; Zulkarnain & Purnama, 2016). The dissemination and reception of this ideology becomes evident through numerous small attacks that can be carried out by autonomous cells acting without any centralised network connection (Gartenstein-Ross & Grossman, 2009). Returnees from Syria and Iraq are also playing an important role in spreading this totalitarian ideology (Neumann, 2015). It seems that the Western world has continuously underestimated the power and influence of this totalitarian Islamist ideology, an ideology which has already changed the Middle East (Amirie, 2015).

There is still a debate about whether the Islamist terrorist organisations are really Islamic. If it is considered Islamic, the question of what makes them Islamic arises. Although there can be no doubt about the academic importance of these questions, they are not the questions we should be pursuing. Since the beginning of Islam there has been no agreement on this issue, not even by Islamic scholars themselves. Rather, we must pursue the question of how this radical group of ISIS has transformed century-old theological concepts into an ideology which turns into a real and present threat by creating particularly socio-psychological factors which enable the group to address recruits and to motivate these recruits to kill (Esposito, 2015).

In the following overview, it is argued that ISIS targetedly addresses the political, socio-psychological
and cultural contexts in which the recruits live by incorporating Islamic elements into a totalitarian ideology that is disseminated independently without a centralised organisation and which, in combination with sociological and psychological factors, motivates people to kill within a short amount of time. From this, the following questions are derived. First, it is asked which political, cultural and psychological factors characterise the contexts in which ISIS has recruited supporters. In connection to this question, the authors refer to the political and cultural context of Iraq, pointing out the interplay between structural violence and patriarchy. Moreover, the authors refer to Western Europe, drawing attention to the marginalisation perceived by potential recruits. This allows the authors to refer to a basis in order to explain how ISIS can address these recruits and motivate them to kill in the shortest possible time. In connection to this, the authors address the explanatory approach suggesting that primarily psychological illness enables brutal killing, while offering an alternative psychological and sociological explanation by referring to an example of an imprisoned ISIS perpetrator. Finally, the authors point out indications showing that these processes are based on a distinct ISIS ideology by doing the following. First, it is referred to ISIS and its selective totalitarian reading of Islamic narratives and the internal and external implementation of this totalitarian understanding. Moreover, the authors address the observation that, in a Western context, for example, the dissemination of the ISIS ideology has become fairly independent of a centralised organisation.

1. The role of Islam

*Historical background – the role of Islam*

Almost from the beginning, Islam has been effective in power politics and religion. A clear separation between the two aspects is still difficult today. Originally, Islam means *submission to God* (Koran, 1959). This submission is supposed to be understood universally. It is connected to both the inner conviction of faith and religious practice. The way of life is connected to both this world and to the afterlife (see Koran, 4/29).

A group of Muslims, also known as Salafists, adhere exclusively to early Islamic Sunni theology, which considers violence a legitimate means of enforcing their Islamic way of life and power. Some Islamist terrorist organisations such as ISIS (Islamic State)* refer to Salafism, which itself is based on the Wahhabism practised since 1731 and since the

Islamic war phase in Medina. This particularly rigid and radical version of Sunni Islam is still practiced in Saudi Arabia today and is tolerated in large parts of the Arab world (MCCants, 2015). Other radical Islamist organisations of the so-called ‘Quietists’ aim at spreading their idea of Islam but officially reject violence. Instead, they seek to influence and take over the social and state structures in countries, like the Gülen movement has been planning for more than 40 years in Turkey, for example. However, it depends on the respective local structures and their chances of survival as to whether the non-violent Salafists always reject violence. The Salafist ideology – both that of the ‘Islamic State’ and that of the non-violent groups – is supposed to be understood as sectarian from a theological point of view and literally from a textual point of view. They seek to create a new world order on the foundations of an early Islamic-Sunni theology (Cui & Glinert, 2016).

*Forcing people into a way of life*

Everyday life is characterised and determined by people who obey strict rules and who believe that everybody must universally submit to these rules. The different forms of clothing between men and women are one example of these rules which leave no room for individualism or other ways of life (Kızılhan, 2018).

For these reasons, democracy, equality, participation and people who get along without social hierarchies, have a different sexual orientation than heterosexuality are confusing for the Islamist terrorists. Realising a patriarchal understanding of masculine maleness, the Islamists reject people who endorse systems such as democracy. Likewise, people with comparatively liberal attitudes, for example, men and women who meet each other without suppressed sexual fantasies, are perceived as confusing and threatening. They cause a fear of a change in society among ISIS members. This is a human ‘primal fear’ of archetypal quality which causes the followers of Islamist terror to quickly withdraw into their own world or to force others to join them by using the threat of weapons. Another form of typical defence is manifested in their propaganda designed to wrap their followers in an anti-Western cocoon of fog (Bazcko et al., 2016). As a result of their conception of Islam, people have repeatedly been brutally murdered on the basis of their homosexuality (ISIS’s persecution of gay people, 2017).

At the same, it must be pointed out that the Western, particularly the public realm of politics and media coverage, behaves in a similar way in so far as they draw on
simplified representations of Islamist perpetrators by depicting them as actors who had been criminals for their entire life and who are partly illiterate and particularly pathological (Hekmatpour & Burns, 2019; Vidino et al., 2017; West & Lloyd, 2017). This is disastrous in many ways. First, it reflects a considerable underestimate of this totalitarian terrorist organisation (Kizilhan, 2018). Many of the leading actors of the ‘Islamic State’ are highly-educated people with university degrees gained abroad. They are experienced guerrilla fighters from Chechnya or Bosnia, engineers, technicians, IT experts, cameramen, chemists, artists and musicians. This is an elite which can certainly keep up with other intellectuals in the Arab world and leaves them partly ‘speechless’ with their know-how. Tightly organised and with a command level, logistics experts, command receivers and contact persons all over the world, they recruited people from all over the world until 2017. Now, they are waging a guerrilla war in the Near and Middle East (Kizilhan & Cavelius, 2016a). However, recruitment continues to take place via scattered autonomous underground networks.

Moreover, a simplified depiction of terrorists which focuses on their pathological characteristics is problematic, as it disables a complex and an accurate analysis of ISIS in different ways. First, it implies a point of view which assumes that perpetrators or recruits are part of a marginal social group which is characterised by people who are ‘crazy’. This reduces the spectrum of perpetrators to people who can only commit inhuman violence and mass murder because they are ‘crazy’. This is reminiscent of the post-war discourse on Holocaust perpetrators when the public as well as the academic realm reduced the perpetrator group to clinically pathological and sadistic SS-perpetrators and a small anonymous mass which was partly illiterate and which had no personal, individual motives (Hekmatpour & Burns, 2019). This limited perspective on the perpetrators obscures the understanding of the perpetrators’ motives which, in turn, are connected to particular political and social contexts. Finally, the focus on a supposed mental illness hamper complex and differentiated explanations which consider other psychological mechanisms and situational factors that can be explained by sociological approaches.

Finally, it ignores empirical evidence and theoretical considerations. The former has shown that being clinically pathological is not necessarily a precondition for committing brutal violence or mass murder. The latter emphasises that an effective and efficient organisation such as ISIS cannot afford to operate with a majority of people who are clinically pathological. These aspects are elaborated on below.

2. Political, cultural and social-psychological factors – radicalisation and recruitment

There are many reasons why people join ISIS. The reasons cannot be generalised to all actual recruits or those persons who could potentially be recruited by ISIS. For these reasons, it is necessary to take a region-specific approach and consider political, social and economic factors. Such a consideration allows a discussion of the conditions that ISIS addresses when it recruits.

ISIS recruits people from different backgrounds and from different parts of the world. We can distinguish between local recruits and foreign recruits. Local recruits mainly come from Syria and Iraq; foreign recruits are people who had lived in Western countries, in North Africa, in Turkey or in East and Southeast Asia before they were recruited (Abedin, 2019; Meir, 2016; Neumann, 2015).

There are many individual reasons why people join the radical Islamic terror groups. Yet the reasons, which are generally mentioned, are historico-religious, political and belligerent. This has led to a ‘culture of violence’ which has developed over centuries (Bar-Tal, 2000; Kizilhan, 2004), and which has had a lasting influence on structural and personal violence.

Interplay between patriarchal elements and structural as well as personal violence

One-time violence, multiple violence or violence which is prevalent over generations such as war, structural violence, dictatorship, occupation or exploitation, change societies. As a result, the role of its members and their relationship to each other changes, too. In sociological terms, the father is the head of the family structure in traditional Islamic societies. If the head of the household cannot offer any protection, a feeling of disappointment arises among the children. This emotional state is manifested in various forms of material and existential fears. Such experiences shape children and adolescents and make them particularly sensitive to supposed injustices – a fact that can be observed to some extent in the so-called Arab Spring. Children and adolescents rebel against their parents and no longer accept the power hierarchy (Sayigh, 2000). The children consider their fathers to be weak. As a result, they turn to radical groups such as ISIS, which is seen as a ‘surrogate father’ and strong. The perspective of many of these
young people is increasingly shaped by the 'heroic fighter who fights for his faith and against the enemy until death'. In this way, it promises the young people a sense of value and identity beyond death. The young people who join the terrorist groups find a new ideological orientation that replaces the weak father, while supposedly protecting and preserving the tradition and values of the father against the enemy. Their tradition is the patriarchal, Arabic-Islamic idea, the vision of the 'original Islam', the Salafism of around 622 A.D. This turns the patriarchal structure upside down, as the father is normally the head of the family. The terrorist organisation and its members take over this role in society and define the rules of how the family – including the father – must live and think. The new role model is not the father, but the young terrorist who is prepared to die in war. This explains, among other things, the conspicuously young age among the activists in Islamist terrorist organisations (Meir, 2016).

These mechanisms do not only shape the individual but also the collective identity, which is of particular importance to young people (Erikson, 1969). This is put right at the centre of the propaganda of ISIS. They propagate the 'lack of culture, the worthlessness of the person and society' and promise them a new ego, a new identity through submission to Islam. To achieve this goal, the terrorist organisations use social motives, the presence of frustration and a particular depiction of the enemy. When aggression is manifested in such a way that people are purposefully harmed physically or psychologically, materially or socially through personal and structural violence, a society is slowly and steadily undermined and eventually destroyed. Violence is always tied to power, because only power allows lasting, targeted aggression, as the dictatorial countries in the Near and Middle East have been doing for the last 80 years (Kizilhan, 2018).

Galtung (Galtung, 2010) assumes that personal, direct violence increases when cultural violence had been internalised as a result of the institutionalisation of structural violence. Above all, the term cultural violence causes us to take a look at the values and the oft-lamented decline in values in modern industrial societies. It is this decline which provides the corresponding legitimation for the use of both personal and collective, politically-motivated violence. For some people as well as for some groups, the feeling of being right and the feeling of being restricted in one’s rights can be a reason for the use of violence. For example, many oppressed groups whose existence as a group or whose rights are not recognised by a state, consider violence which is manifested as legitimate methode in armed struggle.

The motive of justice is only one of many pro-social motives that can promote a willingness to use violence. Moreover, people perceive a decrease in their control over self-determination and participation. This perception leads to reaction, to forms of resistance and also to physical violence (Bar-Tal, 2000).

The motivation of foreign recruits – the example ‘Western Europe’

The above has elaborated on why ‘local’ people with an Islamic background from the Middle East become recruits. At the same time, it is important to explain the reasons why people from Europe, for example, join ISIS, as they make up a significant proportion of ISIS members. In the following, these people are referred to as foreign recruits (Meir, 2016).

With regards to foreign recruits, Neumann (2015) distinguishes between women and young men whose average age is 26 years (Neumann, 2015; Rieger et al., 2013). The different motives are based on similar aspects. Most women join ISIS through, after male contacts had drawn their attention to ISIS. A need for community experience and for structure through rules are important motives for joining. Their main reason for joining ISIS is the desire for social acceptance. Juxtaposing ISIS to Western societies where they feel as sexual accessories, female agents justify their affiliation by drawing attention to their perception that the ISIS community considers them active and central agents with important tasks such as bringing up the next generation and passing on ISIS ideology. In this way, they are held in high esteem (Neumann, 2015). For most types of recruits identified by Neumann (2015), the need for recognition and appreciation is the essential motivation for joining ISIS (Neumann, 2015). This can also be shown for non-foreign recruits. For example, the ISIS terrorist Abu Jihad declared that he had been ‘nobody’ before joining ISIS and that he had ‘a task’ now (Kizilhan & Cavelius, 2016a, p. 75). Finding an identity, experiencing a sense of community as well as power and experiencing emotional relationships with like-minded group members and leaders constitute the motives of those who seek some kind of meaning and of those who are mere followers (Rabasa & Benard, 2015).

The increased need for identity and appreciation is closely linked to socio-economic and psychosocial factors. In many cases the parents have migrated. This means that followers and those who pursue a sense of meaning often represent the second generation of migrants. This type of recruit has little in-depth religious knowledge of Islam. Mostly, they are part of the social underclass in Western societies. Prior to
recruitment, the majority of them had often attracted attention through criminal activities. Many of them had had a criminal record before joining ISIS (Hoffman, 2016). They are characterised by having a low level of education and by having extremely limited opportunities on the job market. As a result, those affected often feel rejected by the society in which they live. ISIS offers them a contrasting perspective and they gain appreciation and recognition by performing an important task within ISIS. In this way, the experience of social discrimination and marginalisation caused by socio-economic status and personal background is removed (Neumann, 2015; Rieger et al., 2013).

3. From radicalisation to terrorism – interplay between psychological and sociological factors

The foregoing is only a partial answer to the question of why and how recruits become murderers under the ISIS membership. So far, the motivation of the perpetrators has been shown through their radicalisation, i.e. their personal acceptance of radical ideas. In order to explain the implementation of radical ideas in the context of mass killings, it is essential to consider terrorism, i.e. the targeted use of violence which is manifested cruel brutality and mass killings in the ISIS context (Kizihan, 2018; Madhood & Rane, 2017).

On the basis of the previous explanations, it is also important to examine the question of the extent to which mental illness plays a role in ISIS perpetrators and their execution of mass killings. Additionally, the psychological phenomenon of dehumanisation and sociological factors are considered as explanations in this context.

Perception of collective hurt and humiliation as legitimisation of fatal violence

In the context of structural and personal violence, it can be observed in Iraq, subconscious collective hurt is perceived by the members of local societies (Maskur, 2018; Meir, 2016). Several elements constitute this perception of subconscious collective hurt among many people in the Arab world (Amirie, 2015; Zulkarnain & Purnama, 2016). The first element is low self-esteem which results from a perceived humiliation and from a feeling that other actors or states in the world do not seem to recognise the perceived humiliation. Secondly, there is an emphasis on double standards in the Western world which, in this point of view, becomes evident in the following way. On the one hand, Western policy emphasises democracy and ascribes importance to human rights. On the other hand, it is said to torture people, for example, in the prisons of Abu Garib or Guantanamo. Moreover, the sale of weapons to the Islamic dictators who oppress their own people as well as the internal struggles for the ‘right faith’, define this contradiction to the emphasis on democracy. These elements shape subconscious collective hurt which coincides with perceived non-recognition. In the view of those who experience this kind of psychological hurt, the non-recognition can be compensated through a ‘culture of violence’ (Bar-Tal, 2000). Terrorists, for example, need not necessarily have experienced any hurt themselves. Essentially, they start from a real or perceived humiliation and experience this as a fundamental attack on their social and collective identity (Krueger & Malekova, 2003). The collective identity is always a part of the ego-identity, which, in turn, evokes emotions when something happens to the group or its members. The ‘successes’ of the group, which are derived from suicide attacks or the beheading of ‘infidels’, enable them to counteract the humiliation. This process, in turn, boosts their self-esteem. Defeats and humiliations lead to the devaluation of social and collective identity, independently of any individual experiences (Erikson, 1969).

The violence, which is the result of a perceived norm violation or the result of the motivation to protect these values and norms, is spread partly by society and its culture. Despite the knowledge that killing human beings is morally wrong, humanitarianism is suppressed by the archaic conviction which has been entrenched for centuries, as this conviction is charged with strong emotions. It denies and de-legitimises any kind of humanity or it justifies the killing of human beings (Kizihan & Cavelius, 2016a).

Construction of a clear separation between ‘we’ and ‘the others’ as legitimisation of immoral and inhuman acts

Violence which is manifested in the killing of people still needs to be explained, both in respect of those who use it, and of the victims (Galtung, 2010). As life is considered sacred and as this very sacredness is violated by the use of physical violence, those involved need some kind of a principle to justify their immoral and inhuman acts (Kizihan, 2018). This results from the fundamental human need to live in a meaningful, predictable and just world. The perpetrators must hear why they are to carry out the violent acts and the victims must hear why they have had to suffer the loss. Often, the victims retaliate and become executors. They become those who use physical violence against their opponents. In
This case, both sides see themselves as victims who also carry out violent acts (Sternberg, 2003). For this reason, perpetrators seek explanations, justifications, and principles to legitimise the physical violence they use, regardless of whether they are perpetrators or victims. This process is characterised by a seeming contradiction: On the one hand, they actively use physical violence. In this way, they become perpetrators. On the other hand, they were victims of the violence they use. McFarlane and Colleagues (1986) have presented an examination of the justifications for violence in the Protestant/Catholic conflict put forward by the inhabitants of rural areas of Northern Ireland (McFarlane et al., 1987). People felt the need to explain extreme acts of violence such as murders, bombings etc. They insisted that these acts of violence were aberrations carried out by outsiders. It is important to note that the justifications and explanations usually include issues which de-legitimise the opponent (Bar-Tal, 2000). De-legitimisation is defined as the extremely negative classification of social and religious groups which ultimately denies their humanity. De-legitimation assumes that the opposing party is evil, malicious, immoral and inhuman. This is the simplest, most effective and most comprehensive way to explain why people have been killed and why they should continuously be killed. Possible inner psychological conflicts are suppressed. Yet, this does not mean that these people are mentally ill (Kizilhan, 2018).

**Terrorists and mental illness**

Up to now, there is no valid evidence that terrorists are mentally ill (Hudson, 1999; Sageman, 2008). Of course, individual perpetrators can also suffer from mental illness but when one considers organised Islamist terrorism, it quickly becomes clear that such organisations could hardly afford to recruit any individual which is conspicuous in a way that the individual shows evident signs of being mentally ill. In interviews with terrorists, including suicide perpetrators, the interviewers were unable to detect any mental illness (Kizilhan & Othman, 2012). Even if one assumes that terrorists have an antisocial personality disorder, i.e. that they are intelligent and capable but not empathetic and are prone to be manipulated to carry out acts of violence, this would disrupt or make co-operation and co-ordination in groups impossible. Crenshaw (1981) even comes to the opposite conclusion: Relatively ‘normal’ persons are more likely to join terrorist groups (Crenshaw, 1981). In many cases, they even have to be particularly well versed in normality in order to avoid public attention, as was the case with the 11 September 2001 assassins in New York (Stahelski, 2004).

A small exception is the group of terrorists who, for example, were themselves captured by the Americans, mistreated, tortured, humiliated, dehumanised and treated like ‘animals’. Many of these people have never, and will never, forget this trauma and are certainly, in part, mentally ill. Sternberg’s Duplex Theory of Hatred (2003) postulates that hatred consists of three components: passion, decision/commitment and negation of intimacy (Sternberg, 2003). The quality of hate and the resulting behavioural tendencies is different depending on which of these components is significant and to what extent each component is significant (Sternberg, 2003). The more the components of hatred are present, the more the danger of committing bestial acts increases. The more the terrorists use violence, the more of them may take pleasure in killing people (Elbert et al., 2018). This appetite for violence can lead to bloodlust which is synonymous with killing for its own sake. In addition to an adrenaline rush, a cortisol and endorphin release accompanies this mostly ethically unacceptable pleasure (Elbert et al., 2018; Kizilhan, 2018). Appetitive aggression can be activated with increasing violence and the dehumanisation of man with loss of empathy towards one’s enemies, based on an Islamist ideology. This aggression overrides moral and cultural inhibition and activates the biological reward system in the brain (Elbert et al., 2018; Kizilhan, 2018). The more these persons kill and feel lust, the more the experience produces positive emotions and a voluntary return is almost impossible. Collectively, this allows for war and destruction up to the attempt to wipe out entire ethnic groups, as we have seen with ISIS against the Yazidi people (Kizilhan, 2020). Nevertheless, this appetitive aggression, which amounts to a disposition towards the lust for violence, can by no means be seen as a psychopathological oddity. It is part of human nature, part of the human behavioural repertoire, which can be activated in a legitimised way by a totalitarian ideology like the one expressed by ISIS where there is enough space and opportunity (Elbert et al., 2018).

Islamist terrorist organisations see themselves as prosocial. They fight for their culture. They live and die for its essence. For these reasons, they are convinced that they will go to paradise. At the same time, however, they will become part of the collective memory of their group through their deeds. In this way, they become increasingly successful at inspiring more fighters with their cause. They become martyrs and thus immortal, as they exemplify the essence and values of the group through their physical death. In this way, they are certain that they contribute to the survival of their group.
If an individual seeks to become a part of this group and to live and act according to these rules, he or she must go through a formidable process of giving up his or her own individuality (Esposito, 2015).

Once a person is caused to sacrifice his own ‘self’ for the benefit of the terrorist group, his or her mindset and behaviour take on quasi-automatic characteristics. In every situation, a previously trained pattern of behaviour and action is activated which only accepts the mindset of the terrorists and which must destroy the mentality of the others. In this context, suicide and murder become normal actions. On another psychological level, like a delusion, they even believe that the victims, like the Yazidi people or the Christians, are liberated by death from the ‘misery of the non-believer’ (Kizilhan & Othman, 2012).

Killing the ‘non-believers’ and dying themselves are goals that make any dialogue and access to these people impossible, as dying is understood as liberation. Feelings of empathy, the grief and pain of other people who are not part of them are so repressed that they can even kill children or bury hundreds of people alive and behead them (International, 2014). Such apocalyptic attitudes, as we see them in ISIS terrorism in Iraq or Syria, lead to the dehumanisation of human beings (Kizilhan, 2018).

This fanaticism can lead to a loss or to a control of instinctive empathy. This means that they can control their innate empathy with the other person and can feel no pity or pain when experiencing violence (Avenanti et al., 2010). At the same time, they are very emotional and empathetic towards their own group when the members are injured, when they suffer pain or when they are killed.

With its more totalitarian ideology, Islamic terror changes people. It changes complete societies directly and indirectly. It directly changes the Islamic but also the Western world.

With its ideology, ISIS has not lost supporters. Despite its military and territorial losses, it spreads its inhuman idea with all traditional and modern means and increasingly radicalises people and societies. This represents a new dimension of threat which must be taken very seriously (Jasko et al., 2020).

Dehumanisation and sociological mechanisms

Dehumanisation has been addressed previously as an explanation. According to this perspective, the dehumanisation of victims is sufficient to initiate changes in thought patterns and behaviour which prepare ISIS members for mass killing (Alqurainy et al., 2019). This argumentation is constituted by the so-called ‘necessity thesis’. It states that, in genocidal contexts, the mass killing of people must be preceded by a process in which perpetrators have dehumanised their victims. Different kinds of dehumanisation can be observed among ISIS perpetrators. The ISIS terrorist Abu Jihad, for example, justifies the murders and atrocities committed against Yazidi men and women by pointing out that Yazidi people are generally devil worshippers (Kizilhan & Cavelius, 2016b) and that women are the spoils of war (Kizilhan & Cavelius, 2016a, 68, 72 f.). In this example, dehumanisation is reflected in the alleged resemblance between the Yazidi people and the devil as non-human beings and in the view of women as spoils of war, which shows an objectification of human beings (Jasko et al., 2020). While the statements by Abu Jihad reflect dehumanisation of the victim, there are indications of self-dehumanisation when Abu Jihad considers himself as a tool of Allah (Kizilhan & Cavelius, 2016b; Ramsay, 2017). Despite these observations of different kinds of dehumanisation, it is important to emphasise that ISIS ideology draws on a rhetoric paying much attention to the ‘believer vs. non-believer’ dichotomy (Ramsay, 2017; Thompson, 2017). Moreover, the explanatory approaches which ascribe much importance to dehumanisation can be challenged in many other ways.

The importance of human emotions in connection to inhuman brutality

Despite these kinds of dehumanisation processes, this perspective alone is not sufficient to explain the actions of ISIS followers. Social aspects must also be taken into account. One reason for this is that the shift from radicalisation phases to terrorist processes rarely takes place via media such as Internet-mediated dehumanisation processes, but mostly via physical, social encounters and processes (Rabasa & Benard, 2015). Additionally, dehumanisation processes are often not necessary for the reduction of inhibitions with regard to brutality towards people and (mass) killings (Alqurainy et al., 2019). Sometimes, it is even in the interest of the perpetrators to perceive the victims as human individuals. Some studies refer to ISIS and its depiction of its military campaigns where emotions like humiliation manifested in the victims’ faces are brough to the fore with the camera (mis-en-scène). These depictions ascribe much importance to a close relationship to the victims. For this, the victims must be humans as their emotions are essential here (Ramsay, 2017). The former can be supported by sociological explanations and the latter can be justified.
on the basis of the search for recognition that coincides with the search for identity (Neumann, 2015).

Consequently, it happens that genocidal perpetrators even feel the need to experience their victims explicitly as human beings. In this context, perpetrators want their victims to express human ways of feeling and perceiving. This need is closely linked to the search for identity explained above and to the need for recognition as an individual (Neumann, 2015). Many perpetrators experience an upgrading from a ‘nobody’ to a ‘somebody’ through their ISIS membership (Kizilhan, 2018; Kizilhan & Cavelius, 2016a).

In this process, it seems that the ‘somebody’, which goes hand in hand with a search for identity and the external recognition of one’s own person, requires that the perpetrators perceive the victims as human beings with feelings. This is closely connected to religious ideas in the following way: ‘Marrying’ their slaves and raping people who were originally non-Muslims, perpetrators believe that they will be rewarded for this in the afterlife, as they are convinced that their act of raping turns non-Muslims into Muslims. Moreover, they enter a relationship with this person and, despite the rape and other forms of violence, see her as their ‘wife’, albeit temporarily. Dehumanisation does not take place here, as the precondition for ‘marriage’ is the preservation of the victim’s human identity. Furthermore, it becomes apparent that no dehumanisation takes place. After pregnancy, the victim and the children from the rape are seen as part of their ‘family’ and are allowed to live in the extended family of the ISIS perpetrator, to receive tasks and duties, even if these are done under duress. The victim must be ‘glad’ and ‘grateful’ that he or she has been spared by the perpetrator. This gratitude can only come from a human being and is, at the same time, an expression of the power difference between the perpetrator and the victim(s), through which the perpetrator can assure himself of the importance of his own person (Jasko et al., 2020).

Referring to the work of Weißmann (2015), the authors use sociological models to explain the brutal actions and mass killings of ISIS (Weißmann, 2015). In this context, Niklas Luhmann’s concept of a ‘Formal Organization’ is fundamental. The expectations communicated by the organisation towards its members are central to this concept. These expectations are linked to the goal of the organisation – in the case of ISIS this is the dissemination of the caliphate (Luhmann, 1964). These expectations enable the perpetrators to assure themselves that their brutal actions will not result in any sanctions. Personal responsibility can be negated. As a result, ISIS perpetrators can kill other people and, at the same time, experience themselves as individuals who are acting morally without remorse (Weißmann, 2015).

Despite this legitimising framework and the perpetrators’ attempts to dehumanise victims, there may still exist psychological barriers to commit brutal violence and (mass) murder. In addition to dehumanisation processes, alternative methods on the part of ISIS explain why people are motivated to murder other people in a relatively short time.

In the context of the social dimension, the alternatives to the dehumanisation processes as used by ISIS can be characterised by three aspects. First, there is the phenomenon of role distance. In connection to this, a criminalisation of the victims, which is the second aspect, takes place (Alqurainy et al., 2019). Finally, ISIS uses reward systems to ensure that either the limits of the dehumanisation processes can be overcome or that dehumanisation processes are not necessary for a person to commit brutal violence and (mass) murder. The justification of an ISIS executioner (Kizilhan & Cavelius, 2016a) who publicly beheads people can be explained through a role distance which is based on orders and formal group expectations and the legitimising framework of the formal organisation mentioned above (Goffman, 1969). This goes hand in hand with the separation of the actions which are carried out in the name of the group from any personal motives (Alqurainy et al., 2019; Jasko et al., 2020).

Finally, among ISIS there is a close connection between the reward systems that allow personal enrichment and the motivation to commit murder (Kizilhan, 2004). ISIS followers were rewarded with slaves, the houses of Christians who had fled, with money and (status) positions and with tasks in the ISIS community which coincide with power over the population.

4. ‘Active’ and ‘passive’ dissemination of ISIS ideology

Being actively and passively disseminated through targeted and skilful propagandist means, ISIS ideology effectively addresses the situation and the needs of recruits. In this way, the ideology is a key element (Madhood & Rane, 2017; Neumann, 2015; Rieger et al., 2013).

ISIS actively addresses potential recruits by incorporating traditional religious narratives from Islam. In this context, ‘active’ can be considered as synonymous with ‘centralized’. This means that ISIS members and people who have joined ISIS create propaganda content (Neumann, 2015). They make a targeted selection of religious narratives from Islam, especially for the online context (Bazcko et al., 2016; Maskur, 2018).
5. Indications of a distinct totalitarian ideology

There are several indications showing that ISIS has constructed and implemented a distinct totalitarian ideology.

Selective interpretations of Islam narratives

Islam, like many other religions, is a faith with a strong tradition of varied interpretation. An extremist version of Islam does not necessarily mean that it is the correct one, or even the only one. The majority of Muslims reject the extremist version of Islam. However, ISIS, like many other Islamist extremist organisations, interprets Islam differently (Mawsili, 1992). ISIS and its interpretation of Islam is very selective, emphasising only narratives that are suitable to construct the necessity of establishing a totalitarian state. ISIS mainly incorporates two out of the eleven narratives from Islam which are well-known to most Muslims in a global context (Halverson et al., 2011; Jasko et al., 2020; Madhood & Rane, 2017; Meir, 2016). Many of them are not considered and incorporated into the ISIS ideology narrative, as they depict Islam as weak, for instance, (Jasko et al., 2020). The narrative of Nakba is one example. In movies such as Flames of War or in online magazines such as Dabiq, ISIS uses the narrative and symbolism of the crusader as embodiment of Western oppression and discrimination against Muslims to raise awareness and reinforce feelings of discrimination and social marginalisation (Madhood & Rane, 2017; Rabasa & Benard, 2015; Rieger et al., 2013).

In order to suggest an alternative to oppression and marginalization, ISIS constructs dichotomies, drawing on the narrative of Jahiliya, a state and society which suffers from the injustice and crimes as a result of its ignorance of Allah. Through a juxtaposition of Jahiliya and the establishment of an Islamic State based on Islamic law, the contrast to and necessity for a totalitarian ISIS order are established (Jasko et al., 2020).

Scholars have discussed the interplay between religion in ISIS ideology very controversially (Coolsaet, 2016; Gartenstein-Ross & Grossman, 2009; Kizilhan & Cavelius, 2016a; Madhood & Rane, 2017; Munton et al., 2011; Precht, 2007; Rieger et al., 2013). What can definitely be proven is the role of religion as a legitimising factor, both for the group as a whole and for the contributing individual. Cotee (2017), for example, points out that personal religious motives may not initially have played a role in joining ISIS (Cotee, 2017). However, religious-ideological motives do play a central role by enabling violence, for example. For this reason, religious-ideological aspects are not the cause but the driving, reinforcing force for radicalisation and the use of violence (Madhood & Rane, 2017; Solomon, 2016).

Furthermore, the use of religious elements in the dissemination of ideology demonstrates that religion is ultimately not the focus of attention, while it is important when people join ISIS. In its teaching of ideology, ISIS primarily draws attention to the political and social grievances in the environment of the potential recruit. A 1:1 reproduction of authentic and fundamental Islamic sources is not the purpose. Rather, religious elements are selected and adapted for the dissemination of ideology and for the corresponding circle of addressees in such a way which enables ISIS to create political and social dichotomies (Madhood & Rane, 2017; Neumann, 2015; Rieger et al., 2013). Here, the focus is primarily on a social identity, on group coherence and on a threat posed by another group in a competitive context rather than on religious elements (Avenanti et al., 2010; Cikara et al., 2014). ISIS offers all these aspects in its ideology or takes them into account by referring to religious narratives from Islam. This becomes visible, for example, through the dichotomies described above. These elements must be merely seen as a means for a different purpose and not as the actual focus.

The fusion of selected religious Islamic narratives and a totalitarian ideology is not only visible in ISIS propaganda but also in practice and in how ISIS
members realise their understanding of politics and society internally and externally. This can be seen as another indication of a distinct ideology (Weiss & Hassan, 2016).

Making use of a selective reading of Islam, ISIS has attempted to form an autonomous state. In this process, ISIS has sought to gain control over geographical areas and over people, implementing a totalitarian approach internally and externally. Members wear the same clothes, beards, behave in the same way, and learn the same religious passages by heart. Personal and individual needs are oppressed. The only task which ISIS members have to perform is to serve the ISIS community (Jasko et al., 2020; Kizilhan, 2018).

Additionally, there are other indications of the development of a distinct ISIS ideology. This includes genocidal contexts in which ISIS perpetrators killed members of religious minorities for not being Muslims. These genocidal contexts are additionally characterised by forced Islamisation and arranged marriage which aims to ‘produce’ children for the ‘Islamic State’, so it can grow and expand (Cui & Glinert, 2016; Jasko et al., 2020; Kizilhan, 2018).

Summary

Providing a historical background of Islam in the social and political context of Iraq which is characterised by an interplay of patriarchal elements and structural as well as personal violence, the authors have pointed out central ways of how ISIS can address potential recruits in a Middle East context. Here, a society of mistrust has been developing and the trauma will take many years to overcome – if it fades away at all. The change in the psyche of these terrorists plays a special role and this is why we must continuously address and seek to understand the psychology of terror but also the societies from which they originate.

In a Western context, ISIS addresses people who have been disadvantaged in socio-economic way and, in this way, have been experiencing social discrimination and marginalisation. This is why we must also pay more attention to young people with an Islamic background in the Western world, as studies show that the more strongly Islamic migrants feel bound to their faith, the more they agree with the masculinity norms that legitimise violence and the more often they prefer violent media including those of Islamic terror.

In connection to these aspects, the authors have explained that ISIS recruits do not necessarily have to be mentally ill in order to turn into a person who commits immoral and inhuman acts by participating in mass-killings within a short period of time after their recruitment. Refering to the perception of a collective hurt and humiliation as legitimisation of fatal violence in the Arab world, the authors have demonstrated that there are other psychological explanations for inhuman acts than mental illness. The legitimisation based on this perception can be enforced by ISIS and its construction of a clear separation between the ‘us’ and ‘the others’. In this context, the victims are often criminalised. This is an example of a psycho-sociological explanation which is also manifested in the role distance approach and the reward systems motivating ISIS members to commit cruel inhuman acts.

Finally, the authors aimed to introduce the argument which emphasises that ISIS members have constructed and attempted to implement a distinct totalitarian ideology based on a selective reading and understanding of Islamic narratives. ISIS is a theocracy, a proto-state, and a Salafist jihadist group. The ideology of ISIS can be described as a mixture of Salafism, Salafist jihadism, Wahhabism, and Sunni Islamist fundamentalism. ISIS took control of an area, a ‘state,’ for a short period of time and attempted to shape society in all realms with its conception of Islam. Islamist terrorism, whether they call themselves ‘Islamic State’ or otherwise, will spread terrorism and, in this way, will professionalise the evocation fear and the continuation of terror in the various countries.

It is suggested that future studies primarily focus on two aspects. First, they must verify or falsify the authors’ observations on indications of a distinct ISIS ideology characterised by totalitarianism. In addition to that, they must examine whether ISIS ideology changes the societies from which the organisation recruits. If future studies conclude that ISIS ideology does so, they must show how this change becomes evident.

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We confirm that all the paper meets the ethical guidelines, including adherence to the legal requirements of the country in the study.

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