

ISIS As A Public Health Issue

Aaron Zappaz

Scott Atran has written about the recruitment of ISIS (AKA ISIL), but mainly from the standpoint of their incorporation into a quasi-state with an official ideology that is one interpretation of Islam.

“The mainly 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).”

<https://aeon.co/essays/why-isis-has-the-potential-to-be-a-world-altering-revolution>

Atran makes reference to rage and the desire for revenge on the part of those who direct the so-called “War on Terror.”

“What accounts for the failure of ‘The War on Terror’ and associated efforts to counter the spread of violent extremism? The failure starts with reacting in anger and revenge, engendering more savagery without stopping to grasp the revolutionary character of radical Arab Sunni revivalism.”

ISIS will remain prominent in world affairs as long as the psychological, social, economic, and political forces that foster it remain constant. Attacks or other attempts to remedy problems on levels three and four (organized ideologies, and nation states or quasi-nation states can mute the violent expressions, the

savagery directed against innocent people, etc., but the energizing forces still being present, reactivation of organized violence will always be possible. Nazi ideology survived the defeat of Nazi Germany and continues to cause serious problems in the world, for instance. <https://www.splcenter.org/fighting-hate/extremist-files/groups>

For a more robust remediation of ISIS and similar organizations, they must be treated as though they are something analogous to a public health crisis. Medical science depends on the scientific method, and researchers have learned that multi-level responses are usually necessary to securely terminate an epidemic.

The insurgent group called ISIS can be analyzed as a special kind of public mental health problem. Certain conditions arise that lead to epidemics, e.g., new diseases, contamination of water supplies, etc. The most effective way to deal with water-borne diseases may be to teach people to boil the water they drink. What are the analogous factors to deal with in the case of salafist terrorism?

The ISIS-related factors analogous to disease germs, contaminated water, etc. include the values and commonplace ideas, old wives' tales, and the like that children absorb by osmosis from their culture starting soon after birth, and the bad social, economic, political, and other factors that make life difficult for the common people. For some environmental drivers of distress there are cures passed down through the culture that are effective remedies, but for others there are no effective learned remedies. When attempts at remediation fail, the first response of humans is anger and random aggressive actions. When nothing works and a long time passes, the situation may appear to be supported by unknown

adversaries, and rage may result. Identification of these problems with some presumed adversary can result in hatreds and, ultimately, vendettas.

Good public health involves correcting commonplace ideas about how the environment should be maintained, how diseased people should be treated, how bodies of the dead should be handled in ways that will not spread contagion. There are many similar ideas that can exist as so-called common knowledge in any given culture. Some of these ideas have religious content, but may have come from outside one's own tradition and yet are accepted because of their great antiquity and the veneration of members of the culture for those ideas that they feel must be true.

The ideas and values that refer to a god or to fate or some other kinds of ideas that are believed to have transcendent validity can be used by groups such as ISIS. The effective way to combat ISIS and its ilk is to teach people to examine ideas critically. Some ideas, e.g., "An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth," may be misunderstood outside of their original social and historical context.

People blessed with good leadership can learn to critically examine ideas that may have millennia of history and acceptance. There is nothing to fear in correct ideas, even if they overturn one's everyday world of the past.

For good public health policy and practice, a foundation of medical science is required. An analogous attention to the religious documents on which any ISIS-like organization bases its ideology might also be helpful. The difficulty in the case of Islam is that ISIS does not recognize any religious authority other than

that which derives from its own appropriation of a selection of opinions from the Salafist period. There is no central orthodoxy to which their teachings might be contrasted. Besides the Sunni-Shia split, which it seems will never be healed, the culture also lacks a philosophical giant of the stature of Thomas Aquinas with whom anyone attempting to make interpretations or critiques at a later time must contend.

It rarely happens that governments use the institution of public health as a tool of oppression or even as a tool for controlling their people, however, ISIS and similar organizations use their own interpretations of Islam to motivate and to control their subjects. This aspect of ISIS makes it very much like the many so-called cults that use their interpretations of Christianity, various Indian philosophies, qi-gong, religious Daoism, Shinto, etc. to attract and gain control over converts. They all use some of the techniques that were the standard operating procedures of Chinese thought reform during the period around the Korean War. Thought reform was intended to remodel the thinking of non-communists, and especially of anti-communists to make them come to accept and revere the principles of Communism as interpreted by Mao Redoing.

The oppressive treatments used on would-be converts to ISIS share in many of the techniques of the various cults, and among them the key technique is the ruthless control of information. When the authorities are in complete control of the information that converts can receive, they relatively easily produce a state of operation in the minds of converts that inhibits normal reality testing. If some assertion is made by the authorities, in a free situation citizens of a country or members of a religious congregation could seek alternative or supplementary sources of

information and interpretation. Doing so can lead to views that are not in concord with those presented by the authorities, obviously something that no totalitarian organization can tolerate.

Recommendations for government policy and action by concerned groups:

Know the enemy in regard to the received opinions and beliefs supported by tradition that motivate and/or support a totalitarian form of society, and be diligent in subjecting these assertions based on authority to rational inquiry. For instance, question whether the Koran really commands parents to perform infant genital mutilation.

Learn about the social institutions, e.g., groups such as the KKK, that take these traditional beliefs and use them to organize and direct bands of partisans that struggle against legitimate governments and/or eu-social community organizations, and then direct vigorous endeavors toward disrupting these controlling groups by pointing to the ways in which they function that are against the interests of the people in the community. Point out who actually has the power, and who enjoys extra rewards and privileges. For instance, after the government of Mao Zedong took over in China, local Communist party officials became the ones with de facto power over the ordinary people. Abuses of this power began to appear almost immediately, and in a system that lacks any feedback mechanisms such as the election of local officials, there has been little that ordinary people have been able to do to correct such abuses. Predatory behavior necessarily appears in human institutions unless corrective measures are built in and sedulously maintained.

Create and maintain an interpretation or a critique of Islam that is designed to elucidate which passages give general principles and which passages mention commandments or directives that are limited in scope to certain specific social, political, or historical circumstances. Whenever possible, use the Koran itself to explain these passages. Otherwise, seek out the most authoritative commentaries. Publicize these critiques.

Publicize widely the actions of ISIS and other such organizations that conflict with Islam, not simply by asserting that these actions are wrong, but by destroying the rationalizations that have been used to make these actions appear to be good and/or approved by Allah.

Most of the present and potential leaders of the people in Afghanistan, Iraq, Syria, etc. have had limited educations due to policies put in place by dictators and kings, and few if any have had the opportunity to gain leadership skills by participating in government.

For the long term, it is essential to create opportunities for the improvement of leadership skills among all the people of the Middle East.

It will also be of great benefit to the people of the Middle East to foster the development of female leaders on all levels of society. They have thus far proven to be among the most powerful agents for change in the area.

When ISIS or any other salafist organization resorts to military measures to impose its rule, the nations of the West may choose to oppose them directly or indirectly with military force. In all cases the concerned governments ought to make widely known the offenses of ISIS and how the West has chosen to retaliate or aid

others to retaliate against them. Every act of aggression on their part will ideally receive a prompt and appropriate military response.

Existing legitimate governments should be supported with training, educational opportunities for government workers on all levels, and appropriate military training when requested.