

A Study on Motivations and Objectives of Leaders and Simple Fighters in ISIS: Difference or Similarity

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Abstract

Objective: The emergence of the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) was something no one could have predicted prior to the 2003 US Invasion of Iraq. A combination of skilled former Iraqi military personnel, eschatologically savvy Islamic clerics, and an army of domestic and foreign fighters have created the ultimate terrorist pseudo-state.

The huge number of domestic and foreign fighters joined to ISIS, leads us to the question about the general and personal objectives and motivations of warriors. Recognizing these motivations through a deep study is the main perspective of this article. What are the leaders' motivations and what do shape those of the simple fighters? Are there any effective motivations beside of religious objectives? So could some social, psychological or economic factors be traced as the individual motivations?

Answering to such questions helps us to find relatively the degree and the depth of political cohesion and social solidarity inside of ISIS.

Methods: Relying on the explanatory analysis, our methodology is structured with a behaviorist approach. The official statements, declarations and testimonies as well as the discourses, confessions and interviews are considered as the main base of analysis and we try to chase our data from the first and secondary sources.

Results & Conclusions: According to our early prediction which was inspired from cognitive theory, various factors alongside the psychological characters shape the mental justifications and the heart motivations of recruits. And here in our case of study, there are a strong similarity between the understanding and conceptions of leaders and followers.

Keywords: ISIS, Islamic World, Motivations, Warriors, Syria, Iraq.

1. Introduction

1.1. Problematic Question

The emergence of the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) was something no one could have predicted prior to the 2003 US Invasion of Iraq. A combination of skilled former Iraqi military personnel, eschatologically savvy Islamic clerics, and an army of domestic and foreign fighters have created the ultimate terrorist pseudo-state.

By some estimates, over 25,000 foreigners had gone to fight in Syria between the start of the civil war in 2011 and September 2016. This compares with the far lower numbers that participated in conflicts such as the Afghan war (1979-1989), the war in Bosnia (1992-1995), or the war in Iraq (2003-2006). Not only is the number of foreign terrorist fighters far larger and the rate of flow far faster than in these previous wars, but so too is the range of the countries from which they come.

Since ISIS announced in June 2014 that it had re-established the caliphate, the group has mounted a concerted campaign aimed at expanding its presence and influence beyond Syria and Iraq. It has declared the formation of *wilayats* (provinces) in Afghanistan/Pakistan, Algeria, the Caucasus region of Russia, Egypt, Libya, Saudi Arabia, Yemen, and West Africa, while carrying out attacks in several other countries in the surrounding regions. The group has also appealed to Muslims from across the globe to join its cause, with thousands of foreign fighters answering this call to arms.

This huge number of domestic and foreign fighters leads us to the question about the general and personal objectives and motivations of warriors. Recognizing these motivations through a deep study is the main perspective of this article. What are the leaders' motivations and what do shape those of the simple fighters? Are there any effective motivations beside of religious objectives? So could some social, psychological or economic factors be traced as the individual motivations?

Answering to such questions helps us to find relatively the degree and the depth of political cohesion and social solidarity inside of ISIS.

Relying on the explanatory analysis, our methodology is structured with a behaviorist approach. The official statements, declarations and testimonies as well as the discourses, confessions and interviews are considered as the main base of analysis and we try to chase our data from the first and secondary sources. The research allows us to compare and analyze the sets of objectives` leaders vs. its followers. The comparison let us to obtain a more exact understanding about the real motivations of fighters.

1.2. Previous Literature

The works and the previous published manuscripts could be classified into two categories. First there are some texts which limit their own circle of survey to the general and official statements or discourse. They try to focus on the documents or statements which are issued by the authorities through their

discourses or declarations. The positions, highlighted in the state journals like Dabiq or Roumieh, are one of sources here.

Mara Revkin by her distinguished work entitled “The legal foundations of the Islamic State” in 2016, has carried out a good research relating to ISIS, its formation and its general objectives. She, in part I, provides a comprehensive overview of the Islamic State’s legal system, including its laws, police apparatus, courts, and prisons. In part II, she explains how the Islamic State uses its legal system to advance three state-building objectives: (1) establishing a legal basis for territorial sovereignty and expansion; (2) enforcing internal discipline within Islamic State’s own ranks; and (3) justifying taxation, which has become an increasingly important source of revenue for the group. (Revkin. 2016)

Colin Tucker like Revkin, tries to present a general view on ISIS and its probable implications in future. When he speaks about the goals, he refers to the general goals of ISIS in the Middle East. (Tucker. 2014)

In the second category, our eminent authors try to touch more the conceptions and motivation of both, leaders and simple warriors, and to elaborate the issue relaying on the social context as well as their individual understandings. Jeff Victoroff puts his attention on the psychological aspects of terrorists. (Victoroff. 2005)

Brian has tried to recognize the criteria which separate successful from failed terrorist actions. He and his colleague wanted to clarify the importance of conceptions considered by an individual or terrorist group as the successful or the failed actions. (Brian.2009)

United Nations Office of Counter-Terrorism (UNOCT) with close coordination of Professor Hamed el-Said and Mr. Richard Barrett has prepared a likely comprehensive report on the conceptions of the Foreign Terrorist Fighters Phenomenon in Syria. (UNOCT.2017)

The report focus on two issues, first, motivations to join transnational terrorist organizations, second, motivations to abandon them.

Johannes Siebert and his colleagues have realized a nearly deep study on the objectives of ISIS and its followers. As the firsts who have tried to distinguish the leaders’ objectives from those of the followers, they have relied on the interviews alongside of open source. (Siebert. 2015)

All of these works deserve a great appreciation, but it sounds that they lack likely deep concentration on the actors’ motivations. By this study, we try to emphasize more, as our major concern, on the individual and general motivations.

Applying a multi- discipline approach, we consider the various factors affecting the objectives and motivations. So we are committed to look at the social, religious, economic and psychological factors when analyzing individual motivations as well as the political, security issue and religious factors when considering organizational motivations.

1.3. Theoretical Debate: Cognitive Theory

Pape (2005) believes that a three-step process can explain suicide terrorism--examining the strategic logic of terrorism, the social logic of suicide terrorism and the individual logic of suicide terrorism.

In searching for the motives of the suicide attackers themselves, the more useful tactic is to look at individual responses to different levels of social integration and social regulation and the categories of altruistic, anomic and fatalistic suicide. (Korbl.2017)

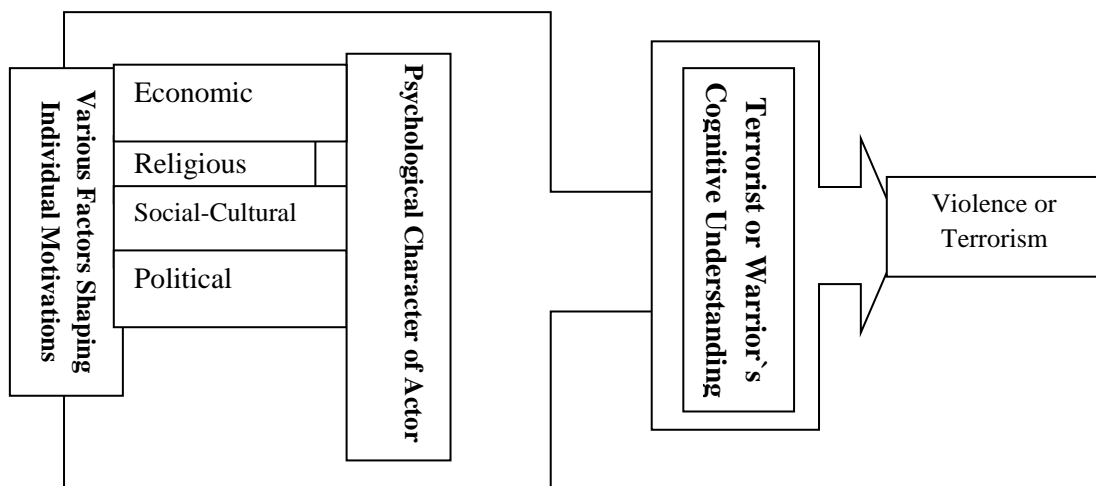
Psychologist B.J. Berkowitz (1972) describes six psychological types who would be most likely to threaten or try to use WMD (weapon Mass Destruction): paranoids, paranoid schizophrenics, borderline mental defectives, schizophrenic types, passive-aggressive personality types, and sociopath personalities. He considers sociopaths the most likely actually to use WMD. (Hudson.1999)

But attempts to explain terrorism in purely psychological terms ignore the very real economic, political, and social factors that have always motivated radical activists, as well as the possibility that biological or physiological variables may play a role in bringing an individual to the point of perpetrating terrorism. (Hudson.1999)

As Martha Crenshaw has observed, "The actions of terrorist organizations are based on a subjective interpretation of the world rather than objective reality". The variables from which their belief systems are formed include their political and social environments, cultural traditions, and the internal dynamics of their clandestine groups. Their convictions may seem irrational or delusional to society in general, but the terrorists may nevertheless act rationally in their commitment to acting on their convictions.

According to cognitive theory, an individual's mental activities (perception, memory, and reasoning) are important determinants of behavior. Cognition is an important concept in psychology, for it is the general process by which individuals come to know about and make sense of the world. Terrorists view the world within the narrow lens of their own ideology, whether it be Marxism-Leninism, anarchism, nationalism, Islamic fundamentalism, or some other ideology. Most researchers agree that terrorists generally do not regard themselves as terrorists but rather as soldiers, liberators, martyrs, and legitimate fighters for noble social causes. Those terrorists who recognize that their actions are terroristic are so committed to their cause that they do not really care how they are viewed in the outside world.

Figure No 1. Factors Shaping Motivations of Terrorist Fighter based on Cognitive Theory



Relying on the cognitive theory, the point of our emphasis will be on the convictions and the understandings of warrior, no matter from leader group or simple followers. Here we should concentrate on the various factors shaping the mental conceptions and beliefs.

2.Data and Analysis

2.1. Leaders` motivations

Through various instruments and documents, the motivations of high authorities of ISIS could be traced. According to one key document, i.e, letter issued by the survivor of Al-Qaeda- ayman-al-zawahiris or so called “Abu Mohammad”- to Abu Musab Zarqawi, four steps are declared as long terms objectives of Jihadist movement: The first is to expel the Americans from Iraq. The second is to establish an Islamic authority or Amirate, then develop it and support it until it achieves the level of a Caliphate. To extend the jihad wave to the secular countries neighboring Iraq is the third step and the fourth will be the clash with Israel.(Abu Mohammad. 2005)

Since at least 2004, a significant goal of the group has been the foundation of a Sunni Islamic state.(Beauchamp.2014) Specifically, ISIS has sought to establish itself as a caliphate, an Islamic state led by a group of religious authorities under a supreme leader – the caliph – who is believed to be the successor to Prophet Muhammad.(Johnson.2014)

In June 2014, ISIS published a document in which it claimed to have traced the lineage of its leader al-Baghdadi back to Muhammad, and upon proclaiming a new caliphate on 29 June, the group appointed al-Baghdadi as its caliph. (Johnson.2014)

Dabiq, official journal of ISIS, declared the establishment of Islamic Caliphate as the most important event in the contemporary history and the world. By the title of "Return of Khaliphah", Dabiq begins its first issue, 1 Ramada.1435, so:

"Amirul-Mu'minin(Emir of believers) said: "O Muslims everywhere, glad tidings to you and expect good. Raise your head high, for today – by Allah's grace – you have a state and Khilafah, which will return your dignity, might, rights, and leadership. It is a state where the Arab and non-Arab, the white man and black man, the easterner and westerner are all brothers.

It is a Khilafah that gathered the Caucasian, Indian, Chinese, Shami, Iraqi, Yemeni, Egyptian, Maghribi (North African), American, French, German, and Australian." (Dabiq. 1435)

As a further sample, according to Daesh's spokesman, Adnani, while addressing its supporters in April 2013, the ambition of the Islamic State is to redraw the world in order to make it conform to the rules of the caliphate, the way the Prophet promulgated them. In August of the same year he added: "Our objective is to establish an Islamic State that does not recognize borders." (Ghossain Zaiter.2015)

Based on four extracts, drawn from audio statements issued by ISIS' leaders between 2007 and 2014, we can recognize the main lines of "Creed and Path" ('aqida wa-manhaj) for ISIS. Through the nineteen stated aims, there are three which are highlighted and enjoyed a dominant shadow over all. The first is the necessity of destroying and eradicating all manifestations of idolatry (*shirk*). The second is establishment of Caliphate and the third points out to the belief that jihad in God's path is an individual obligation, from the fall of al-Andalus until the liberation of [all] Muslim lands. (Bunzel.2015)

Siebert and his colleagues, relying on an excerpt of the 353 SME (Subject Matter Expert) statements related to goals, values, grievances, and objectives of ISIL, elaborate the high ranking leader's motivations in the various dimensions. (Siebert. 2015)

Using this source list of 353 statements, 24 objectives were identified, including three strategic, five fundamental and 16 means objectives. The resulting objectives hierarchy is shown in Figure number 2.

The first strategic objective Establish Caliphate in Iraq and the Levant can be achieved by pursuing the fundamental objective "Eliminate Current Rulers in Iraq and Levant" and for the regions ISIS already occupies by the fundamental objective "Function as a State" and "Provide Services". The second strategic objective "Expand Islam and Sharia Law Worldwide" can be achieved by pursuing the fundamental objective "Purge the World of Anti-Islamic Forces". The third strategic objective "Recreate the Power and Glory of (Sunni) Islam" can be achieved by pursuing the fundamental objectives, "Give Meaning to the Lives of Sunnis and Implement a Pure and Strict Version of Islam".

Figure No. 2: ISIL Leaders' Objectives Derived from Expert Interviews. (Siebert. 2015:14)

Establish a Caliphate in Iraq and the Levant		Expand Islam and Sharia Law Worldwide	Recreate the Power and Glory of (Sunni) Islam	
Eliminate Current Rulers in Iraq and the Levant	Function as a State and Provide Services	Purge the World of Anti-Islamic Forces	Give Meaning to the Lives of Sunnis	Implement a Pure and Strict Version of Islam
Occupy, Defend, and Expand Territory	Provide Internal Security, Semblance of Order	Create Brand and Notoriety as Ruthless and Pure	Stop Shia Violence and Discrimination	Be Recognized as the Leader of the Jihad
Provide Military Leadership and Resources	Secure Resources and Supply Lines	Kill, Frighten, and Convert Infidels	Radicalize Followers	Teach the Children True Islam
Increase Numbers of Fighters and Followers	Fight Decadency and Corruption	Spread Fanaticism and Terror		
Eliminate Foreign Agents, Tyrants and Jews	Settle Grievances, Redistribute Wealth			
	Generate Revenue			

2.2. Followers' Motivations

Scott Atran and his research colleagues were sitting face-to-face with captured ISIS fighters in Kirkuk, a city in northern Iraq, near the front lines of battle. Through interviews, the researchers discovered that three crucial factors motivate ISIS fighters: a deep commitment to sacred values, the readiness to forsake family for those values, and the perceived spiritual strength of the group or community that the fighter represents.(Howard.2017)

Relying on a study carried out by Musharbash who has assessed 3000 recruitment inventories from the archives of ISIS in Syria, the majority of volunteers seeking to be simple fighter. Based on this report, two questions were multiple choices in inventory:

1.Does the recruit want to become A- a fighter, B- a suicide bomber, or C- an Inghimasi (انغماسی- guerilla fighter).

2.And the recruit is asked to classify his level of Sharia literacy: A- weak or B- medium or C- student/scholar level

Just under ten percent offer to die as suicide bombers ("Istishhadi"). Even less want to be an Inghimasi. The vast majority opts to become just a "fighter"

("muqatil"). It should be noted that just these three options and nothing else were suggested in the inventory.

Roughly three quarters think of their own knowledge of Sharia as "weak". The large majority of recruits is aged between 20 and 30 and appears to have had no real jobs or jobs that require little training or have had no advanced schooling.

The biggest contingents reflected in the documents are from Tunisia and Saudi Arabia, followed by Libya, Morocco and Egypt. (Musharbash. 2016) So being recruited just as a simple fighter was figured out as the main motivation of majority.

In another survey, the researchers from Quantum (Joint Quantum Institute) in Maryland University collected televised interviews with 49 fighters in Syria and Iraq—some in custody, some who had defected, and some who were still in the fight. They analyzed the fighters' statements using a psycho-contextual analytical technique developed by Canadian psychologist Marisa Zavalloni to divine the motivational forces and personal characteristics of the subjects.

The Quantum researchers grouped the fighters into nine categories, based on the reasons they gave for joining ISIS or other extremist groups. They are:

- **Status seekers:** *Intent on improving "their social standing" these people are driven primarily by money "and certain recognition by others around them."*
- **Identity seekers:** *Prone to feeling isolated or alienated, these individuals "often feel like outsiders in their initial unfamiliar/unintelligible environment and seek to identify with another group." Islam, for many of these provides "a pre-packaged transnational identity."*
- **Revenge seekers:** *They consider themselves part of a group that is being repressed by the West or someone else.*
- **Redemption seekers:** *They joined ISIS because they believe it vindicates them, or ameliorates previous sinfulness.*
- **Responsibility seekers:** *Basically, people who have joined or support ISIS because it provides some material or financial support for their family.*
- **Thrill seekers:** *Joined ISIS for adventure.*
- **Ideology seekers:** *These want to impose their view of Islam on others.*
- **Justice seekers:** *They respond to what they perceive as injustice. "The justice seekers' 'raison d'être' ceases to exist once the perceived injustice stops," the report says.*
- **Death seekers:** *These people "have most probably suffered from a significant trauma/loss in their lives and consider death as the only way out with a reputation of martyr instead of someone who has committed suicide." (Tucker. 2015)*

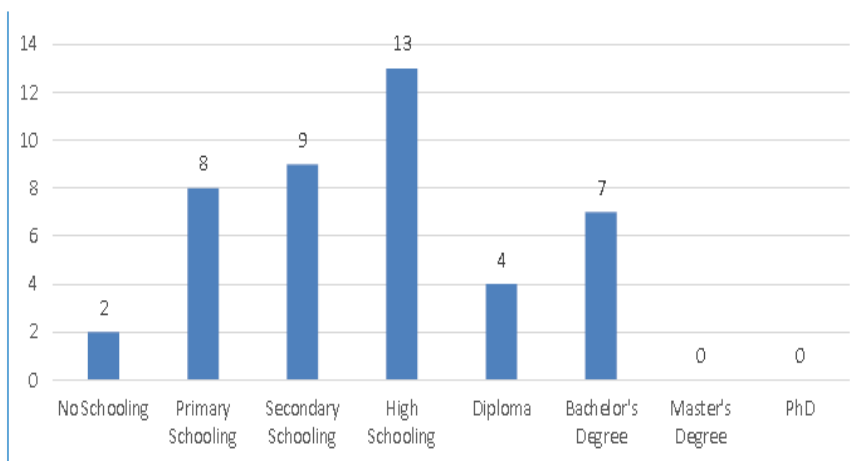
According to this research, a combination of various motivations including psychological, social-economic, religious and political ones can be traced as the motivations of simple followers.

Bakker and his colleague have assessed the issue by studying the Belgian and Dutch Jihadist Foreign Fighters (2012–2015). According to their outcomes, when looking at the motivations to join the jihad, they note that both groups are

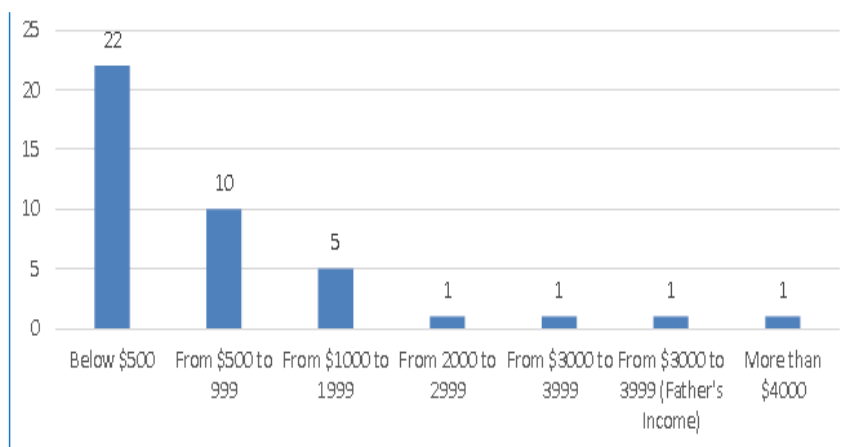
believed to have done so for a wide variety of reasons ranging from a lack of meaningfulness to social exclusion and (perceived) discrimination. (Bakker. 2016)

United Nations Office of Counter-Terrorism has organized a nearly deep research for enhancing the understanding of the foreign terrorist fighters phenomenon in Syria in 2017. (UNOCT. 2017) The outcomes are very interesting.

Graph No 1: Level of Education of Fighters (UNOCT. 2017:28)



Graph No 2: Income Level of Fighters (ONOCT. 2017:30)



According to the report, most FTFs (Foreign Terrorist Fighters) interviewed are young, male and without an advanced education. Perhaps contrary to general perceptions, the report finds that many FTFs serving as foot soldiers lack opportunity are disadvantaged economically, lack education and have poor labor prospects, even when they come from Western societies.

Most FTFs in this sample come from large families in urban communities that are rather isolated from mainstream social, economic and political activity. Some of the families from which these particular FTFs come often show signs of internal dysfunction or stress. FTFs leave their country of residence for different reasons. Push and pull factors intertwine in different ways according to the individual and the internal and external environment each one faces. While this survey suggests that economic factors have become more important as a push factor than was the case in earlier waves of FTFs, for example to Afghanistan in the 1980s, other political and social factors have contributed in varying degrees.

The push factors are also inevitably more country-specific than the pull factors. Religious belief seems to have played a minimal role in the motivation of this FTF sample. Unresolved conflicts that include inter-communal violence appear to be one of the strongest magnets for FTFs. A sense of identity with - and a desire to help - co-religionists who are perceived as victimized and mistreated by other groups has developed into a sense of obligation to act in defense of one's in-group. This was one of the most common reasons that individual FTFs in our sample gave for travelling to Syria. Empathy with the Sunni communities in Syria that are portrayed as being under attack as much for their belief as for any other reason was a common theme. For some, this sense of brotherhood was reinforced by a sense of religious obligation.

The authors finally report five motivations for joining ISIS:

- Material and personal interests, such as cash payments in the form of a salary, food, accommodation, furniture, and other rewards given to fighters for 'good work.

- Ideological and faith motivation. Faith and ideology here refer to the desire to learn and study the Sharia and join religious classes run by ISIS for its members because 'they had been largely denied religious education under the [Government of Syria].

- ISIS' ability to bring security, reduce crime and achieve equality in the areas under its

- Control through the embrace of a strict Islamic code.

- Purification and cleansing, especially of past sins.

- Fear of a worse alternative. (UNOCT. 2017: 20)

Based on SMEs, Siebert has identified three strategic objectives such as Support Sunni Causes; Recreate the Glory of Islam, and Give Meaning to Own Life. The SMEs mentioned few objectives that could be qualified as fundamental objectives, so the 23 means objectives were assigned directly to the strategic objectives to which they contribute most. For example Pursue and Defend Sharia Law and Pursue Pure and Strict Islam, were assigned to the strategic objective Recreate the Glory of Islam, and Fight Oppression and Discrimination by Shia and West, Have a Better, More Authentic Life, or Feeling Empowerment were assigned to the strategic objective Give Meaning to Own Life.

Figure No. 4: ISIL Followers` Objectives Derived from Expert Interviews. (Siebert. 2015:20)

Support Sunni & Humanitarian Causes	Recreate the Glory of Islam	Give Meaning to Own Life	
Re-establish Sunni Power and Place in History	Eliminate Non-Believers	Have a Better, More Authentic Life	Feeling of Empowerment
Fight Oppression & Discrimination by Shia and West	Become a Warrior of God, Martyr	Sanctioned Violence and Brutality	Pursue Masculine Themes: Women, Adventure, Power
Defend Family and Friends	Pursue and Defend Sharia Law	Start Life Over, Join a Worthy Cause	Become Part of a Brotherhood of Fighters
Righting the Wrongs of the Past	Pursue Pure and Strict Islam	Rebellion Against Complacent Fathers	Cool, Attractive, New Identity
Conquer Evil	High Likelihood of Success when Trying to Access and Join ISIS	Join a Powerful, Winning Team	Being a Good Believer
Dignity and Honor, Devotion to the Cause		Seeking Status and Wealth	Fill a Vacuum

3.Conclusion

This article has tried to offer a deeper attempt to shed light on the question by providing an overview on the motivations of jihadist foreign fighters and by analyzing the psychological, socio-economic, religious and political desires as well as individual characteristics. The article contributes to the discussion on the topic of foreign fighters which is hampered by a lack of empirical data on the phenomenon in general and detailed information on individual cases in particular.

As a general overview, the objectives of ISIS leaders and the followers are closely related. All fundamental objectives of the ISIS` organization are promoted by at least one fundamental follower objective. Furthermore, most means objectives of the ISIS organization are related to fundamental follower objectives.

But it cannot be neglected that “Give meaning to own life” is registered as a major objective and motivation of followers. This main objective illustrates a multilayer package of psychological, economic and social motivations for simple fighters.

According to the UNOCT's report, individual and economic motivations should be seriously considered, motivations such as material and personal interests, like cash payments in the form of a salary, food, accommodation, furniture, and other rewards given to fighters for 'good work'.

Independently of their individual objectives, all followers can support ISIS by pursuing their own objectives. ISIS' leaders clearly understand and use the objectives of potential recruits in their videos and Internet campaigns, which are a mix of martial action movies and showcases of law and order and humanitarian efforts under ISIS's rule. In the analysis of the relationships between the objectives of ISIS's leaders and followers we identified several disconnects, suggesting that the ISIS organization's media campaigns cater to followers' values to attract recruits.

Due to the low level of Islamic knowledge, for the majority of followers, ISIS' authorities have identified and applied the best, complicated and successful methods for the integration process of simple followers. As a smart group seeking to mobilize new recruits and communicate rebellious messages, ISIS has developed communication strategies dependent on a mixture of primitive and new media tools. It has used billboards, murals and mosque sermons to communicate with local populations, while building a relatively sophisticated presence on the internet to communicate with its targeted audience in territory and abroad.

According to our early prediction which was inspired from cognitive theory, various factors alongside the psychological characters shape the mental justifications and the heart motivations of recruits. And here in our case of study, there are a strong similarity between the understanding and conceptions of leaders and followers. These common conceptions have played an important role in creating and promoting the nearly same motivations for both. So the relative political cohesion and social solidarity inside of ISIS could not be denied.

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