Operationalizing Eric Hoffer's Theory of Mass Movements

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Abstract

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Operationalizing Eric Hoffer's Theory of Mass Movements

The Twentieth Century was a bloody time, swept by "waves of mass fanaticism."[1] Mass movements, such as Communism, Fascism, Nazism, and untold strains of nationalism, spurred conflicts that buffeted the world's states and societies. The Middle East was not immune to this trend. The ideas and ideologues behind movements such as Arab nationalism, Pan-Islamism, Baathism, Nasserism, neo-Wahhabism, the Iranian Islamic Revolution, Salafi Jihadism, and many more have spurred both mass mobilization and conflict in the region and the World. The international violent extremist organizations that the United States and its partners contend with today (DAESH and Al-Qaeda) are only the latest in a long chain of revisionist Middle Eastern mass movements.

While the ideas and momentum behind mass movements such as Communism and Fascism seem to have stalled in the West, the Islamic World continues to confront waves of violent revisionism. These movements have led to great regional instability and threaten the security of states and communities across the globe. Academics, politicians, intelligence officers, and the militaries of many nations have exhaustively analyzed these movements and the organizations behind them. We still, however, struggle to craft coherent, effective strategies to defeat both the organizations that are the face of these movements and the ideas behind them. Our recent efforts have had limited and temporal effects because of our tendency to treat ISIS and al-Qaeda simply as organizations and not as parts of mass social movements. Examining key theoretical works on the sociology of mass movements provides critical insights into how we can craft a more effective long term strategy.

In the 20th Century, ranks of academics and politicians struggled to comprehend how social impulses and ideas coalesced into powerful and focused mass movements. Oddly, an outsider wrote the most insightful, accessible, and lasting work on the subject. For most of his life Eric Hoffer was a field hand and longshoreman in California. He was also a self-taught philosopher and a writer of remarkable skill. In 1951, his first major work, *True Believer*, was greeted with broad acclaim. It laid out the human dynamics behind mass movements and has been the seminal text in this arena ever since. Despite his lack of academic credentials, the *New York Times* gave it a generally positive review, declaring that it "glitters with icy wit," and was "practically lumpy with challenging ideas."[2] Before long, President Eisenhower would cite it in speeches and prestigious academic journals would declare it to be a "concentrated distillation of wisdom."[3] Despite the insight and import of Hoffer's work, few have attempted to operationalize its wisdom. This paper attempts to glean from Hoffer's theory of mass movements guidance that can assist in the true defeat of the violent extremists that challenge America's security today.

This paper focuses primarily on the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS or DAESH). It should be noted, however, that this is only the latest incarnation in a long chain of reactionary Sunni Islamist movements. Defeating this incarnation will not necessarily prevent this movement or a future descendent from rising up in another place and time. Thus, the guidance we seek from Hoffer must focus not only on finding better means to defeat ISIS in the short term, but also ways to snuff out the ideas, causes, and support for violent Salafi-Jihadism in general. World history is full of "isms" that no longer hold any sway over mankind. Islam existed for centuries before this

particular brand began to spread with the rise of Wahabbism in the 18th century and again with later, more anti-Colonial incarnations of political Islam in the late 19th and early 20th Century. Thus, it is possible to foresee a future where the influence of the ideas behind al-Qaeda and ISIS are greatly diminished. Hopefully, by understanding the social dynamics behind ISIS, we can find strategies that will prevent the frustrations that spawn these movements from bursting into flame.

Mass Movements

First, it is important to understand just what kind of social phenomena Hoffer examined. The study of social movements is a major field within sociology. These movements are generally defined as organized and sustained efforts by large groups of people to effect or resist change in society primarily through means outside of the normal institutional channels.[4] This definition, however, is a catch-all for almost every kind of social movement. The mass movements that Hoffer studied are not your average interest group. They are an order of magnitude deeper and more powerful than simply a group of like-minded individual banding together for a common purpose.

Hoffer saw mass movements as causes that demonstrated a great ability to "release a powerful flow of activity," and "a general enthusiasm," for "united action" in a population.[5] Hoffer's mass movements seek societal reforms significant enough to promise "sudden and spectacular change" in the lives of true believers.[6] The ideas and promises of these mass movements are so inspiring that many come to see them as "a holy cause."[7] Hoffer noted that mass movements on this scale share a number of common tendencies. First, their adherents frequently share a ready willingness to die for their cause.[8] Second, mass movements inspire "fervent hope" and fanatical devotion in those with a "frustrated state of mind."[9] Finally, with these feelings come their inverse

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tendencies as well, to include hatred and intolerance toward those outside the movement.[10] Hoffer lists numerous examples of mass movements throughout his work, citing Christianity and Islam, Zionism and Communism, nationalisms of many stripes, and many more. He notes that mass movements are not necessarily bad or good. They, however, are all similar in the devotion they inspire and the dynamics of how and who they attract as true believers.

Given a common understanding of what a mass movement is, we must now consider if the forces the United States and its partners are now facing qualify as a Hofferian mass movement. ISIS seems to fit all of the criteria of a mass movement. First, it demonstrates great ability to mobilize large numbers of people to its cause. Polling in the Muslim world consistently shows minority but solid sympathy for ISIS in the range of four to ten percent. Just in the Arab world, this equates to between 16 and 40 million sympathizers susceptible to their message.[11] They have attracted a force of fighters that could easily number over 100,000.[12] Estimates, however, vary so widely that no good number exists, but consensus puts the numbers of fighting true believers on a scale of tens of thousands. Numbers alone, though, do not qualify a social phenomenon to be a mass movement. The quality and character of its message must fit Hoffer's criteria as well.

In this manner, ISIS seems tailor made as a mass movement. A mass movement promises its followers a better life on a grand scale. Hoffer wrote that true believers are "seized with a wild hope," and "proceed recklessly with the present, wreck it if necessary, [to] create a new world."[13] At a basic level, ISIS promises to "provide justice to the masses, restore law and order, and end corruption."[14] Their leadership, however,

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goes far beyond these practical goals. Their Caliph, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi promises true believers both power and Paradise, stating that "a day will come when the Muslim will walk everywhere as a master," and God will provide both victory and "a garden as wide as the heavens and the earth (at-Tahrim: 8)."[15] In pursuit of this transcendent world, al-Baghdadi urges his followers to take the present world and "kick it down, trample it, and leave it behind you."[16]

This level of rhetoric, leveraging deep and common religious and political attitudes, cannot but engender feelings in its followers that it is a holy cause. The evidence that many have been willing to die for this movement is strewn across the battlefields of the Levant. For over three years the number of fighters willing to die under ISIS's banner has stayed high, ranging anywhere from 30,000 to 200,000.[17] This level of commitment has remained steady even as Al-Baghdadi has made clear that self-sacrifice is expected, urging his mujahedeen to "terrify the enemies of Allah and seek death in the places where [they] expect to find it."[18]

Finally, the deep belief and zealous hope of a mass movement must also inspire a corresponding hatred of those outside the movement. Indeed, ISIS breeds contempt in their disciples for those who do not share in their passion. Al-Baghdadi makes the distinction and demand explicit. He stated that, "indeed the world today has been divided into two camps and two trenches, with no third camp present: The camp of Islam and faith and the camp of *kufr* (disbelief) and hypocrisy."[19] In essence, he declared war on all those outside of his narrow vision and control. In every manner, ISIS meets the criteria for consideration as a mass movement. Indeed, one could even

consider it as almost the archetype of mass movements given the similarities between its rhetoric and Hoffer's descriptions.

<div align="center">Hoffer's Dynamics of Mass Movements</div>

It is best to explain the core of Hoffer's work on the dynamics of mass movements before proceeding on to specific strategy recommendations. As previously discussed, mass movements encourage united action and fanaticism among true believers for a cause that will be transformative or redemptive for society. Hoffer believed that all mass movements were similar in almost all essential ways. They attract the same kind of followers using similar social and psychological dynamics and persuasive tools. The beneficial or harmful nature of a movement does not alter the core mechanics.

The dynamic begins with the frustrated individual. The fodder for mass movements are people who are discontented not only with their lot in life and the condition of society but also with themselves. They see their lives as devalued, with little purpose or import. This self-impotence and lack of self-esteem feeds and reinforces a belief that the forces that direct and shape our futures are outside of ourselves and beyond individual control. This condition establishes a propensity for "self-renunciation."[20] The frustrated malcontents of society will reach out for something to assuage their feelings of discouragement and powerlessness.

Mass movements offer potential followers the ability to replace a "life irremediably spoiled," with one of meaning.[21] The new true believers make an unconscious trade of their free will and individuality for the hope and power offered by the movement. Through unity with a collective whole, the frustrated individual gains power. Through belief in a doctrine, they gain hope. Hoffer believed that "faith in a holy

cause is to a considerable extent a substitute for the lost faith in [themselves]."[22] Generally developed in an atmosphere of passion, this faith has no relation to reason but rather is part of a "process of identification."[23] Hoffer found that movements' leaders craft their doctrines to be "fact proof screen[s]" rather than well-reasoned justifications for wild action.[24] Despite this, the true believer will hold to doctrine "not primarily out of its justness and holiness but because of his desperate need for something to hold on to."[25]

Military members often tend to discount the forces that move and grow mass movements due to our membership in a profession that prides itself on reason and critical analysis. We often disregard the influence of ISIS's messages because we see them as irrational. A lack of critical thought and reason, however, does not make the psychological and social forces behind these movements any less powerful. One only needs to look at the impact of previous mass movements on humanity to see their power. Hoffer saw that "dreams, visions, and wild hopes are mighty weapons and realistic tools. The practical-mindedness of a true leader consists in recognizing the practical value of these tools."[26] We must never discount the power of our enemy's tools and attractiveness of his message. We must take the dynamics of mass movements seriously, as they exist, and use them to our advantage in developing effective techniques to defeat them.

Recommendations for Tactics and Strategy

Eric Hoffer crafted *True Believer* as a theoretical discussion of the general dynamics of all mass movements. Hoffer, however, offered limited specific operational guidance for those wishing to destroy of defeat one due to the general nature of his work and its focus on the creation of movements. Fortunately, his work contains

sufficient detail to derive many potential options for disrupting or defeating our current antagonists.

These possible means of defeat group into two categories. First, Hoffer's work supports some important short term tactical approaches to improve our campaign against ISIS. This includes a continued effort to target key leaders, ways to improve our information operations, and improved ways to identify those susceptible to conversion for both counter-intelligence work and for early intervention by families, communities, and local authorities. Second, Hoffer's insights are especially useful in suggesting ways to craft better strategy for the long-term defeat of violent Salafist extremist organizations and decrease the potential for Islamist social movements to transform into violent mass movements. These include ways to undermine their narrative and to provide opportunities for belonging that might diffuse the appeal of these particular mass movements.

Effective Short Term Means to Disrupt and Defeat ISIS

<u>Continued Targeting of Key Leaders</u>

To this day, debate continues regarding the value of targeting operations against key leaders of terrorist organizations. Many are uneasy with these tactics because of the potential collateral damage and their similarity to assassination. Hoffer's work, however, points to the importance of these efforts due to the essential role that key leaders play in establishing and perpetuating a mass movement.

There are two types of critical leaders in an active movement. First, there is the fanatical, charismatic leader. These individuals are the key catalysts for unifying the disaffected and focusing their efforts: The Hitlers, Churchills, and Ghandhis. Hoffer believed that, "without [them] there will be no movement,"[27] and due to their absence,

"the disaffection engendered by militant men of words remains undirected and can vent itself only in pointless and easily suppressed disorders." The 2011 uprisings in Egypt are a good example. Without a central leader, the popular uprisings in Tahrir Square and around the country could not coalesce into a self-sustaining movement. Both the Muslim Brotherhood and conservative forces led by the Army were able to, over time, suppress the leaderless popular forces, manipulate them, and outlast them. Eventually the vigor of the uprising dissipated.

The second essential type of leaders are the "practical men of action."[28] These leaders, while true believers themselves, have a more utilitarian approach. They are the leaders behind the charismatic fanatic that make the operation run. Most importantly they transform the movement from a social aggregation into an organization with institutions that "fix and perpetuate its unity and readiness for self-sacrifice."[29] According to Hoffer, a movement that lacks this supporting cast will eventually expend its energy and power on "the suicidal dissensions and recklessness of the fanatics," who created it.[30] The targeted killing of both sets of leaders will have a strategic impact on the violent extremist organizations that we face.

The death or loss of key leaders, however, is not a panacea for our strategic problem. While scholars of Salafist movements, such as Fawaz Gerges, concur that "personalities are pivotal in jihadist groups," these movements have also demonstrated great resiliency and an ability to quickly replace key leaders.[31] What effects then can we expect from effective operations targeting their leadership? While lethal targeting may not guarantee victory, it does have worthwhile effects. First, following the death of a key leader we can expect these movements to become less effective as organizations.

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Effective terrorists, insurgents, and charismatic leaders are a limited resource. Studies of campaigns against similar organizations confirm that as key leaders are killed, captured, or driven into hiding, the effectiveness of their operations drops appreciably.[32]

Second, as we kill or capture its leaders, ISIS's level of organization and ability to build institutions will drop. With fewer practical men of action and with those remaining leaders disrupted, their ability to develop their Caliphate decreases. It becomes more difficult for them to provide services, plan operations, and provide logistical support. Most importantly, they cannot easily build and support the institutions that would consolidate, focus, and perpetuate their cause.

Without consolidating institutions and with key leaders dying, ISIS will become more and more dependent on personalities with fewer ties and personal loyalties to Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi. Internal trust will decrease and the chances for schism will rise. We witnessed this in previous incarnations of ISIS (al-Qaeda in Iraq and the Islamic State) during transitions periods after the death of key leaders.[33] The infighting and challenges to authority that occur could threaten the life of the movement or at least its effectiveness and unity.

The final impact that we can expect is an increase in violence toward civilians. With each transition in leadership, from Abu Musab al-Zarqawi to Abu Omar al-Baghdad and Abu Hamza al-Muhajjer, to Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, inhibitions regarding violence decreased.[34] We see this in the Islamic States' growing willingness to attack civilian targets, conduct assassinations, and declare all those outside the movement to be *takfir* or apostates.[35] While this is certainly a negative result in the short term, it is potentially of strategic benefit.

Increased violence against civilians has historically isolated similar movements from their support base, cutting off sources of revenues and recruits with which to perpetuate and expand their movement. Zarqawi's violence in Iraq led to a massive decrease in Sunni support, aided the Sahwa movement, and even created a schism with al-Qaeda Central.[36] In Algeria, violence against civilians led directly to a loss of support for and the eventual defeat of the Armed Islamic Group (GIA).[37] A continued shift toward the extremes of terror will create much horror, but its strategic impact on potential supporters and recruits will benefit those who confront ISIS.

The United States and its partners should continue to hunt down ISIS key leaders and focus our limited resources on this effort. Our broader actions in Iraq and Syria have killed a great number of ISIS soldiers and had significant tactical effects. Unfortunately, as of 2016, ISIS seems to be replacing its battlefield losses as quickly as they occur.[38] Focusing on the removal of top leaders and the attrition of their practical men of action, however, will provide much greater strategic effects.

Improving Information Operations Messaging

Often, in information operations, U.S personnel will choose themes and messages that best resonate with either themselves or with the enemy we would wish to have. We attempt to provide facts and make well-reasoned arguments in support of our policies. Unfortunately, as Hoffer stated, "the fanatic cannot be weaned away from his cause by an appeal to his reason."[39] Hoffer offers a good bit of guidance about how to craft effective messages for information operations in his discussions of persuasion and propaganda. We can find insights into how to improve our messaging content and means of delivery by combining his theories with an understanding of the target audience.

Hoffer believed that propaganda derives its influence by reinforcing beliefs and feelings that are already present in the mind of the frustrated. A message must pull on and manipulate these feelings if it is to be effective. In Hoffer's more poetic terms, "they cannot see but what they have already imagined, and it is the music of their own souls they hear in the words of the propagandist."[40] Likewise, he also believed that convincing true believers to deny their holy cause is quite challenging since it requires them to cast aside the power, hope, and purpose that comes with their collective identity.[41]

Who then is a reasonable and appropriate target? The information operations of the United States and its partners should focus mainly on those most vulnerable but still unconverted to the cause of ISIS. This includes those likely to become fighters, but also those likely to provide both direct and indirect support, through expressed opinions, donations, and political support.

The themes we use should be ones that are commonly held general beliefs of both Arabs and Muslims. For example, when asked in recent polling what they respected most about al-Qaeda, a majority of Arabs answered that they respect violent extremist movements most for their willingness to confront the West and for their willingness to support Islamic causes.[42] There is also a strong aversion among Arabs to Western intervention in Middle Eastern and Islamic affairs.[43] Hoffer noted even in the 1950s that "anti-Western fervor," was one of the most powerful inspirations for rising mass movements around the world.[44] Capitalizing on this theme, an effective message might be that ISIS and al-Qaeda's actions actually cause Western intervention and interference in the Middle East. One could portray images of "what might have been" if

the United States and its allies had stayed at arm's length instead of being drawn in by the likes of Saddam Hussein and Osama bin Laden.

In a similar vein, partners could emphasize messages that play upon the widely held belief in Pan-Arab and Pan-Islamic identities. While these identities generally are of lesser importance to familial, tribal and often national identities, they are still powerful forces and widespread beliefs. Messages utilizing these identities have been effective in the past by showing that the actions of organizations such as ISIS work against the interests of the *Ummah* or Muslim community. For example, one might point out that Zarqawi's violence brought on a schism between al-Qaeda and the local Iraqi Sunni population.[45] Similar messaging was quite effective in 2005 in Jordan following al-Qaeda in Iraq's bombing of a wedding party in Amman.[46] Continuing on the path of leveraging broad common identities, one might easily use messages containing Koranic verses that highlight the deviant nature ISIS. This could attempt to paint them as *takfir*, just as they have done to the majority of the *Ummah*. All of these options show great promise because they build on and expand the innate beliefs and preferences of the target audience. We could also improve our effectiveness by simply following the lead of our local allies.

Our partners in the Middle East and the broader Islamic world are essential to improving our information operations. Most saliently, this is because they understand the target audience better than we do. If the messages need to target pre-existing beliefs, no one is more suitable to craft and target the messages than those within the target audience themselves. Beyond this, however, we need them for more than just their local knowledge. We need them to actually conduct the campaigns.

As Hoffer noted, Western interference only manages to breed mass movements spurred by a reaction against our intervention rather than inspired by our ideals.[47] What Hoffer saw is still present today. The Arab public has a broadly held antipathy towards Western meddling in local affairs.[48] Any message seen as coming from the United States is automatically suspect. Not only the themes, but the vernacular and the means of delivery must be local.

To this end, we should develop a better clandestine capability to work with local partners to execute the information war against ISIS.[49] This organization must work with multiple states to coordinate broad themes and improve effectiveness. We could provide technological support and, for smaller states, funding. The inclusion of local partners would assist both in crafting more effective messages and also in ensuring that the messages are not damaging to the host nation.

<u>Research, Profiles, and Risk Mitigation</u>

Hoffer provides not only a general theory of motivation for adherents and converts to mass movements, but he also provides a range of profiles of personalities most likely to join movements. Unfortunately, the amount of serious academic and operational study directed towards the motivations of foreign fighters and violent extremists has not been commensurate with the general level of interest in the politics and strategies of fighting them.[50] The Combatting Terrorism Center has noted that there are only a handful of mostly contradictory schools of thought on the issue of extremist motivation.[51] One of the difficulties with these studies is that they are generally inductive and work from limited data sets collected for other purposes. They, for the most part, produce good detail regarding the demographics and categories of specific motivations. However, they have not proven useful at providing a replicable general explanation for

the motivations of the majority of extremists. Hoffer's work has great potential to provide

a theory that can bind and explain the results of recent studies. By providing theoretical

unity, Hoffer's work offers the promise of great utility through more operationally useful

profiles of high risk individuals.

Hoffer believed that all mass movements seek the same kind of adherents, and

that, often, true believers will convert from one mass movement to another.[52] Frustrated

and disaffected individuals who "see their lives and the present as spoiled beyond

remedy," become "ready to waste and to wreck both."[53] A mass movement steps in and

offers them hope, power, and a replacement for their impotent and sullied selves

through the collective unity of the movement and its holy cause. Hoffer specifically lists

a range of types that are particularly susceptible to joining mass movements. These

include: The poor, misfits, outcasts, minorities, adolescent youth, the ambitious, those in

the grip of some vice or obsession, the impotent, the inordinately selfish, the bored, and

the sinners.[54] Hoffer also explains in some detail the dynamics of how a movement can

recruit each type. His work is more than just convincing theory. In many ways, it

corresponds closely with extant research and extremist behavior.

Al-Qaeda documents, broad research, and anecdotal journalism all indicate a

close correlation between empirical evidence and Hoffer's theories. The authors of the

broadly distributed Jihadist guide, *A Course in the Art of Recruitment*, designed and

distributed it to help the less skilled and independently operating recruiter.[55] It echoes

Hoffer's belief that one movement can find fruitful recruiting grounds among other

movements. It highly recommends seeking out those who are already devout, other

Salafists, and those already in Islamic movements.[56] It also is congruent with Hoffer by

recommending targeting those recently returned to the faith (the sinners), high school

students (adolescent youth), and college students (the ambitious).[57]

In academic research, Mastors and Deffenbaugh's work on the motivations and

demographics of extremists in *The Lesser Jihad* accords with Hoffer in many ways.

They found evidence of a range of motivations that fit neatly into many of Hoffers

profiles, to include: the bored, misfits, sinners, outcasts, the poor, the ambitious, and

minorities.[58] They, however, only saw complexity and dispersion. Hoffer's theory offers

the potential to bind their data together into a coherent whole.

There are three specific ways that Hoffer's theory and profiles could be used to

improve our intelligence work and mitigate risk. First, it can be used to improve and

focus the research done both academically and operationally to gain new insights into

defeating both ISIS and future violent extremist groups. Hoffer's work provides a binding

theory of a general psychological dynamic along with specific profiles of potential

recruits. Much current research simply categorizes demographic data and enumerates

specific self-provided motivations. Conducting this work only by empirical induction will

make it hard to find a unifying dynamic mainly because without a guiding theory to be

tested we don't know the right questions to ask. With Hoffer, we have a place to start.

The other two uses are more operational. Within the United States, federal

agencies work with a wide range of civil and government partners to spot individuals

who may be coming under the sway of ISIS or other movements. Once reported, law

enforcement, social services, or elements in civil society can intervene to prevent

disasters. Currently, we can only offer a laundry list of specific indicators as guides to

what to look for, e.g. issues with U.S. policy, poor academic performance, recent

increase in piety, etc.. These are easily hidden by the subject in interviews or discounted by those close to them. Hoffer's dynamic offers much greater insight and explanatory power.

Hoffer's work provides a powerful narrative description of why someone is susceptible. This narrative may prove more powerful than a laundry list of possible indicators in defeating observer's systems of denial when examining at those well-known to them. We might improve the results of our preventative observations as a society by sharing a compact layman's version of Hoffer's theory and the findings of the above-mentioned research across the military, intelligence, and law enforcement institutions and with community partners.

Finally, we can use Hoffer's profiles and theory to improve how we assess risk. Currently, law enforcement conducts a large volume of interviews to determine if reported individuals pose a threat to security or are at risk for recruitment. There have been a number of high profile failures to evaluate risk by the Federal Bureau of Investigation during investigations and interviews, to include examinations into the perpetrators of terrorism in Boston, Orlando, and in Garland and Fort Hood, Texas.[59] Law enforcement could use Hoffer's work and profiles to improve the manner in which they conduct interviews and determine risk. They could use Hoffer's work to develop a range of questions designed to more deeply understand the psychology of the interviewee. In conjunction with evidence, reporting, and surveillance, a deeper psychological understanding built through Hoffer's lens has great potential to improve how we assess the risk of individuals and how we pro-actively counter terrorism.

Long Term Options to Defeat Violent Extremism

While the previously mentioned recommendations are near term, we need to

remember that conflicts with mass movements are generally long running affairs. For

example, our conflict with Al-Qaeda is now older than many of our soldiers fighting in

the Middle East. ISIS itself has transformed and come back from defeat a number of

times. Its future military defeat as a quasi-state may not actually enable a lasting victory.

Violent political Islam in its modern form traces back to 19th Century/early 20th Century

anti-Colonial reformist movements. Throughout the 20th Century, we witnessed a

number of violent mass movements that used Islam as a key mobilizing force.[60] The

destruction of ISIS's organization and leadership will not necessarily bring an end to

forms of violent political Islam that see the West as an enemy. One of the issues that

the United States has faced during its Global War on Terror is how to effectively counter

the ideas of our enemy. Hoffer's work presents some promising options, using the same

forces that bring mass movements into being to drain them of their power.

Countering the Narrative

Engaging and countering the narrative of our enemy is a commonly espoused

strategy for the long-term defeat of violent Salafist mass movements like ISIS and al-

Qaeda. Hoffer's theory encourages this effort as well. He notes an important role for

thinkers and writers in the creation of mass movement. While countering their narrative

is a necessary effort, there is little hope that it alone will be sufficient to drain the power

from this strain of political Islam.

Hoffer believed that "men of words with a grievance" play a critical role in the

formation of mass movements.[61] Writers, theorists, and intellectuals who are frustrated

with current conditions work to discredit the current order and make the masses both

receptive to change and aware of greater possibilities. He stated that, "the man of words undermines established institutions, discredits those in power, weakens prevailing beliefs and loyalties, and sets the stage for the rise of a mass movement."[62]

We, however, can contest their work. This is best done through partners that better understand Islamic idiom and have greater legitimacy. Partners could include Arab state leaders, state-sponsored Islamic leaders such as Egypt's Grand Mufti, prominent Islamic jurists, and Islamic seminary leadership. The informational counter attack would need to be broad (global), deep (conducted by all means from strategic engagement to twitter), and sustained. It will take tremendous coordination and, frankly, aggressive encouragement by our state partners in the region to sustain an effective campaign. It is a necessary effort that must be fought but has little chance of succeeding on its own.

While we cannot cede the theological and political battlefield of ideas, we should not expect victory to come from this campaign alone. First, the genie is out of the bottle in the case of violent political Islam. The jurisprudence behind it is centuries old. Many of its messages and understandings are commonly known and felt across the Muslim world. The ideas may be debated, but they will remain out in the world for anyone to read or operationalize. Additionally, as others have noted, there is "no firewall between . . . [the ideas of Salafist movements] . . . and mainstream Islam."[63] Their conceptual birthplace resides in the same Koran, *hadith*, and *fiqh* (jurisprudence) used by proponents of more benevolent and peaceful forms of Islam.[64] Finally, counter-arguments might discredit Salafist thought but they offer potential true believers nothing as a replacement. As Laurent Murawiec stated, "modern jihad . . . has stirred the tidal

messianic hopes of disoriented Islamic masses, their dislocated lives and their incensed ruminations and is twice promising Gnostic Paradise, in Allah's kingdom erected on earth, and in Paradise as martyrs."[65] The United States and its partners must do more than just contest ISIS's ideas. We must offer alternatives to potential true believers.

<u>Lower Order Social Movements as Competition for True Believers</u>

There are other phenomena that can provide purpose, hope, and collective identity to the frustrated. While mass movements are large sweeping national and multi-national efforts at popular mobilization, social movements of a lower order and smaller scale can often fill similar psychological needs. Smaller social movements usually manifest themselves through organizations and communal efforts within civil society.

In our own milieu, they are so numerous that they make up the fabric of our communities. Examples include: The Scouting movement, volunteer firefighting units, fraternal clubs and orders (Elks, Rotary, etc.), local volunteer food banks and soup kitchens, animal rescue organizations, Alcoholics Anonymous, unions, and many others too numerous to recount. These movements and organizations provide citizens with outlets for action, a feeling of belonging and purpose, and a way to attach themselves to something greater. Examples of people dedicating much of their lives to these smaller order social movements is commonplace in America and the West. Most Arab leaders, however, purposely limit civil society to reinforce state control. Similarly, civil society is much thinner in the most fertile Western recruiting grounds for ISIS, Arab-European immigrant communities. Immigrants in Europe are often excluded from civil society by language or informal cultural barriers. Turning this trend around could drain much of the frustration that makes individuals vulnerable to radicalism.

Hoffer spent little time on lower order social movements as they were not the focus of his work. He does, however, admit that, "any arrangement which either discourages atomistic individualism or facilitates self-forgetting or offers chances for action and new beginnings tends to counteract the rise and spread of mass movements."[66] Thus, a nation need not combat a rising mass movement with the risky endeavor of encouraging an opposing mass movement. One can drain away potential converts and true believers by simply offering options and competition. If these social movements can reinforce state functioning and national cohesion, all the better.

Unfortunately, encouraging civil society is currently unpopular with many of the leaders in the Middle East. Both reformers and insurgents have attempted to use civil society to challenge state control. The Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt, locked out of political venues, long used charity work to both improve its image and showcase the limited effectiveness of the ruling elite in Cairo. In a similar manner, student governments in Egyptian universities were, for years, a training ground for political mobilization and organization by the Brotherhood and thwarted opposition parties.

Likewise, foreign non-governmental organizations (NGOs), such as Amnesty International, and Human Rights Watch, alongside their local partners often challenge state leaders and demand reform. Even the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) has often stirred resentment by sponsoring elements of civil society that challenge state control, particularly their work with human rights and democratization. Egypt's closure of USAID funded democratization NGOs in 2011-12 is the most recent salient example. For 2017 alone, USAID requested $427 million in funding for human rights and democratization efforts in the Near East.[67] USAID and many Americans see

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this aid as essential to a country's long term stability and success. An authoritarian regime struggling to maintain stability and order might see it differently.

Despite the challenges, the United States must continue to pursue the deepening of civil society in the countries that are the most fertile recruiting grounds for ISIS. It is potentially the most effective way to proactively decrease Salafism's committed support base. This must be done in concert with our partners. We must adjust our tactics, however, to be more effective.

First, we should, for now, decrease our active spending on democratization and human rights NGOs in the region despite how unpopular that action will be. Rather, we should encourage respect for human rights through focusing on high level consultations and using other forms of aid as leverage to achieve steady progress in those areas. While de-emphasizing human rights and democratization may be anathema to many, perhaps it will be more effective to directly and persistently engage with leaders at a high level than to encourage low level activists in a manner that often places them in harm's way. Second, we should focus on supporting NGOs that provide direct social benefits and improve communal connections rather than ones that attempt political reform. Supported social movements and organizations should either reinforce the state or fill in gaps of support between the state and familial groups. Third, USAID should deal with government-approved NGOs rather than governments themselves as much as feasible to counter the corporatist mindset still resident in many of these states which impedes civil society. Fourth, we should not directly confront government oversight of NGOs and civil society as long as it does not hinder or discourage community growth.

Currently civil society is under increasing restrictions across the Middle East, particularly in Egypt. The U.S. government has a better chance of decreasing negative governmental pressure on civil society by adjusting our tactics and following the guidelines above. We can regain the partnership of local governments by accepting some limitations and encouraging stabilizing forms of civil society. It is within a deeper civil society where the best hope lies for the diversion of future true believers.

A Long and a Short Fight

As of March 2017, it appears that ISIS's power is waning while the coalition against it, competing armed groups, and the Iraqi government are all gaining in strength. This, however, does not mean that victory is assured. Indeed, victory might remain elusive even if we retake all of ISIS's territory, kill its Caliph, and drive its remaining leaders underground. ISIS has survived that situation before. Even if it is completely destroyed, that does not prevent another mass movement from rising up in a different location using the same ideology and the same true believers.

Eric Hoffer's mass movement theory presents us with suggestions as to how to confront and finally defeat violent Salafist extremist movements. In the short run, we must target their leaders, improve out public diplomacy and information operations, and increase awareness of who is vulnerable to conversion to enable community intervention and proper risk assessment. In addition, the United States and its partners must take a long view and move to create an environment hostile to the growth of this form of mass movement. We must enable an effective, persistent counter-narrative that portrays Salafist thought as aberrant. We must encourage our partner governments to both dissuade and control Salafist thinkers while actively supporting more moderate understandings of Islam. Finally, we must encourage the deepening of civil society in

the countries that have provided the most recruits to al-Qaeda and ISIS. Hoffer's work does not hold all the answers to defeating ISIS and similar movements. It does, nevertheless, provide a deep understanding of the dynamics of a mass movement's growth and formation. It is through this understanding that we find conceptual decisive points and vulnerabilities to exploit. Thus, we can craft a better strategy for a durable victory.

Endnotes

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