

The Role of Islamist Ideology in Shaping Extremism

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this paper is to provide a psychological analysis of the Hamas Charter. This paper demonstrates the role that persuasive communication plays in Islamist ideology. Using citations from the Hamas Charter, the analysis demonstrates the cognitive distortions characterizing an extremist terror ideology and their role in susceptibility to terrorism.

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The Role of Islamist Ideology in Shaping Extremism

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Research shows that terrorists are not characterized by a unique set of psychological traits, pathologies or socio-economic conditions (Krueger and Maleckova, 2002; Victoroff, 2005). Therefore, several authors have suggested a classification that is typically based on personal and ideological reasons (Pedahzur, 2005; Taarnby, 2005). For example, findings demonstrate that among Lebanese and Palestinians, attachment to political Islamism is the most important determinant of support for suicide attacks, indicating that the greater the commitment to the ideology of Islamism, the more likely respondents are to endorse suicide activities (Haddad, 2004).

Despite the notion that ideology plays a prominent role in persuasive communication, it is not yet clear what mechanisms underlie Islamist terrorist ideology, and how such ideologies affect susceptibility to terrorism (Dijk, 2005). Understanding why terrorist activity appears widely acceptable to specific populations is of major interest to terrorism researchers (Kruglanski & Fishman, 2006). This paper will use citations from the Hamas Charter to examine the psychological mechanisms that underlie Islamist ideology.

The Relevance of Ideology

An ideology is generally defined as “a set of consensually shared beliefs and doctrines that provide the moral and intellectual basis for a political, economic, or social system” (Jost, Fitzsimons, & Kay, 2004, p. 265).

Ideologies are typically expressed and reproduced in different forms of communication, including non-verbal messages, such as pictures, photographs and movies. Respectively, among the many forms of reproduction and interaction, written forms of communication (e.g. constitution, scriptural ideology, legal documents, books, newspapers) play a prominent role in influencing communication and behavior (Dijk, 2005).

Islamism is a set of ideologies which attests that Islam is not only a religion but also a political system; that modern Muslims must return to the ancient roots of their religion and unite politically (Berman, 2003). The Islamist ideology, which begins with a radical critique of liberal western political thought and a life-or-death battle against ‘the West,’ is determined to build a radical Islamic society obedient to the laws of the Qur’an (Hansen & Kainz, 2007; Tibi, 2008).

Ideology as a Justificatory System

This psychological notion suggests that use of extremist ideology helps the Regime to establish a justificatory system. That is because ideology is instrumental to the attainment of the actors’ objectives, and justifiable on moral grounds, thus it is compatible with these actors’ ethics (Jost et al, 2003). Accordingly, in totalitarian systems, ideologies are both a powerful instrument for the mobilization of the masses and the creation of a source of legitimacy. Ideologies give the sense of mission to a leader or a ruling group (Mozaffari, 2007). Following this view, several authors have noted some of the similarities between radical Islamism and the western ideologies of Communism and National Socialism. Berman (2003) suggested that all fight a common enemy: liberal society. Furthermore, all three ideologies share the conviction that a group of people, embodying the good, is thwarted in its mission of realizing the ideal life by a devilish and evil power. According to this worldview, an apocalyptic battle in which evil is to be annihilated is necessary (Hansen & Kainz, 2007).

The Psychological Characteristics of Radical Islamism

Beck (2002) explained the dichotomous splitting of good and evil as a form of cognitive distortion. From this perspective, the resulting statements may contain excessively critical and negative reflections on the world and the future, resulting in forms of aggression and violence. This vicious cycle leads to an extremist behavior observed in others who engage in violent acts, either solely as individuals or as members of a group (Beck, 2002). For example, Beck (2002) stated that radical Islamists ideology evidently shows the cognitive

distortion of *overgeneralization* — that is, the supposed sins that the Enemy may spread to encompass the entire population. Also, people who hold these views show *dichotomous thinking* — a people that are either totally good or totally bad. Finally, they demonstrate *tunnel vision* — once they are engaged in their holy mission (e.g., Jihad), their thinking, and consequently their actions, they focus exclusively on the destruction of the target. They behave like robots programmed for demolition with no attention to the value of the human lives that are destroyed (Beck, 2002). These internal representations are activated under threat and lead to an aggressive violent behavior. Beck's cognitive assertion that maladaptive assumptions cause an individual or group to interpret critical events in a distorted and negative manner has been confirmed in numerous clinical psychological studies conducted over the past decade.

Similarly, social psychology research suggests that the content of extremist ideology has a motivating power in identifying a discrepancy from an "ideal" state and offering a means of removing such discrepancy through action. An ideology that justifies terrorism identifies a culprit (the enemy) presumed responsible for the discrepancy and portrays violence against the culprit as an effective method for moving toward the "ideal" state (e.g., Jihad) (Kruglanski and Fishman, 2006). I argue that the presentation of ideology is a contextual cue that serves as a motivational force. Similarly, the use of cognitive distortions and metaphors of good and evil activate representations of good and evil and leads to a violent behavior. This process will be demonstrated through a close analysis of the Hamas Charter.

The Hamas Charter

The Hamas Charter is the official ideological script of Hamas. Issued in 1988, in thirty-six articles, the Charter outlines the movement's founding beliefs and the primacy of Islam in all aspects of life. The Charter sets forth the organization's position on various issues including social and economic development, ideological influences, education, and its position regarding Israel. As in other forms of extremist ideology, the Hamas Charter defines the enemy, the goal, and the means necessary to attain the goal:

The Enemy: In article 20 it is written:

“The society that confronts a vicious enemy which acts in a way similar to Nazism, making no differentiation between man and woman, between children and old people - such a society is entitled to this Islamic spirit.”

Additionally, in article 32 it is written:

“The Zionist plan is limitless. After Palestine, the Zionists aspire to expand from the Nile to the Euphrates. When they will have digested the region they overtook, they will aspire to further expansion, and so on.”

A Discrepancy from an Ideal State: In article 14 it is written:

“Since this is the case, liberation of Palestine is then an individual duty for every Moslem wherever he may be. On this basis, the problem should be viewed. This should be realized by every Moslem. The day the problem is dealt with on this basis, when the three circles mobilize their capabilities, the present state of affairs will change and the day of liberation will come nearer.”

Means: In article 13 it is written:

“There is no solution for the Palestinian question except through Jihad. Initiatives, proposals and international conferences are all a waste of time and vain endeavors. The Palestinian people know better than to consent to having their future, rights and fate toyed with.”

Jihad, however, is not simply a means of attaining the good life, but it *is* the good life. By fighting and destroying the external enemy the faithful Muslim overcomes his own fear of death and consequently his own inclination towards materialism (Hansen & Kainz, 2007).

Establishment of Justification

By citing parts of the Koran the Hamas Charter justifies its ideology in the name of God.

For example, in article 7 it is written:

“The Day of Judgment will not come about until Moslems fight the Jews (killing the Jews), when the Jew will hide behind stones and trees. The stones and trees will say O Moslems, O Abdulla, there is a Jew behind me, come and kill him. Only the Gharkad tree, (evidently a certain kind of tree) would not do that because it is one of the trees of the Jews.” (related by al-Bukhari and Moslem).”

Similarly, the ideology emphasizes the need to protect the “Moslem” land as a major goal. As written in article 12:

“Nothing in nationalism is more significant or deeper than in the case when an enemy should tread Moslem land. Resisting and quelling the enemy become the individual duty of every Moslem, male or female. A woman can go out to fight the enemy without her husband’s permission, and so does the slave: without his master’s permission.”

Similarly, it is written in article 14:

“Since this is the case, liberation of Palestine is then an individual duty for every Moslem wherever he may be.”

Use of Symbols

Moral and religious symbols permeate the apocalyptic images: the forces of Evil versus the forces of Good: Satan versus Allah. According to this ideology, it is necessary to counterattack in order to preserve and protect Islam. The ideologies legitimize mass murder and suspend traditional moral deterrents to human destruction. Homicide no longer warrants the status of murder but instead is glossed over as essential for preservation and purification of the religious and political order. Islamic radicals who become obsessed with these polarized images are prime candidates for recruitment for assignments of assault on the Enemy (Beck, 2002). Accordingly, several symbols of Antisemitic prejudice are emphasized in the Hamas Charter.

The Protocols of the Elders of Zion

The Protocols of the Elders of Zion is one of the most infamous documents of Antisemitism in history. The *Protocols* are the supposed minutes from twenty-four sessions of a congress held by representatives from the “twelve tribes of Israel” and led by a Grand Rabbi. The alleged purpose of this meeting was to plan the conquest of the world by creating the illusion of the existence of freedom of press, freedom of speech, human rights and democracy (Ben-Itto, 1998).

The Protocols are a forgery, fraud, and clear case of plagiarism. The original source has been identified in a book written in 1864 by Maurice Joly entitled *The Dialogue in Hell Between Machiavelli and Montesquieu*, a satirical attack against the ambitions and methods of the French Emperor Napoleon III. In the book, Machiavelli represented Napoleon III, and described a series of steps that he intended to take to become ruler of the world. The Holy book was in turn based on material borrowed from a popular novel of the time by Eugène Sue entitled *The Mysteries of the People* in which those plotting to rule the world were the Jesuits instead of Napoleon III (Ben-Itto, 1998).

However, despite the conclusive proof that *The Protocols* are a gross forgery, they have been extremely popular throughout history. According to some sources, during the twentieth century more copies of *The Protocols* were published than The Bible (Ben-Itto, 1998). *The Protocols* have been translated into many European languages and sold widely in Arab lands, the United States, and England. But it was in Germany after World War I that *The Protocols* had their greatest success. Used to explain the disasters that had befallen the country: the defeat in the World War I, the hunger, the failing economy, *The Protocols* also became a part of the Nazi propaganda effort to justify persecution of the Jews in the Shoa, and was even made required reading for German students (Jacobs, 2003). Similarly, in the twenty-first century *The Protocols* are frequently used for Antisemitic propaganda. For example, Ahmadinejad made use of the same themes found in *The Protocols* in his virulently Antisemitic speech at Durban II:

“World Zionism personifies racism that falsely resorts to religions and abuses religious sentiments to hide its hatred and ugly face. However, it is of great importance to bring into focus the political goals of some of the world powers and those who control huge economic resources and interests in the world. They mobilize all the resources including their economic and political influence and world media to render support in vain to the Zionist Regime and to maliciously diminish the indignity and disgrace of this Regime.”

The Hamas Charter explicitly refers to *The Protocols of Zion*, accepting them as factual and makes several references to Freemasons as one of the “secret societies” controlled by “Zionists.” Article 32 of the Hamas Charter states:

“The Zionist plan is limitless. After Palestine, the Zionists aspire to expand from the Nile to the Euphrates. When they will have digested the region they overtook, they will aspire to further expansion, and so on. Their plan is embodied in the “Protocols of the Elders of Zion,” and their present conduct is the best proof of what we are saying.”

Similarly, the power of the Jews is emphasized in several ways in the Hamas Charter.

The Jews are Behind the Wars in the World

“They were behind World War I, when they were able to destroy the Islamic Caliphate, making financial gains and controlling resources. They obtained the Balfour Declaration, formed the League of Nations through which they could rule the world. **They were behind World War II**, through which they made huge financial gains by trading in armaments and paved the way for the establishment of their state. It was they who instigated the replacement of the League of Nations with the United Nations and the Security Council to enable them to rule the world through them. **There is no war going on anywhere, without having their finger in it.**”

Financial Power

“With their money, they took control of the world media, news agencies, the press, publishing houses, broadcasting stations, and others. **With their money** they stirred revolutions in various parts of the world with the purpose of achieving their interests and reaping the fruit therein. They were behind the French Revolution, the Communist revolution and most of the revolutions we heard and hear about, here and there. **With their money** they formed secret societies, such as Freemasons, Rotary Clubs, the Lions and others in different parts of the world for the purpose of sabotaging societies and achieving Zionist interests. **With their money** they were able to control imperialistic countries and instigate them to colonize many countries in order to enable them to exploit their resources and spread corruption there” (article 22).

Dehumanization

Dehumanization has traditionally been understood as an extreme form of prejudice that enables violence and cruelty. Defined as an emotional prejudice (“hot” affective feelings such as disgust or envy, lack of empathy) towards out-group members (Fiske & Harris, 2006), researchers argued that dehumanization plays a key role in sanctioned mass violence because it weakens moral restraints on violent behavior (Kelman, 1976).

Dehumanization is broadly used in the Hamas Charter:

“The society that confronts a vicious enemy which acts in **a way similar to Nazism, making no differentiation between man and woman, between children and old people** - such a society is entitled to this Islamic spirit. Our enemy relies on the methods of collective punishment. He has deprived people of their homeland and properties, pursued them in their places of exile and gathering, breaking bones, shooting at women, children and old people, with or without a reason. The enemy has opened detention camps where thousands and thousands of people are thrown and kept under **sub-human conditions**. Added to this, are the demolition of houses, rendering children orphans, meting cruel sentences against thousands of young people, and causing them to spend the best years of their lives in the dungeons of prisons.

In their Nazi treatment, the Jews made no exception for women or children. Their policy of striking fear in the heart is meant for all. They attack people where their breadwinning is concerned, extorting their money and threatening their honor. They deal with people as if they were the worst war criminals. Deportation from the homeland is a kind of murder” (article 2).

Summary

The present analysis highlighted components of extremism that affect susceptibility to terrorism. The Hamas Charter identifies a discrepancy between the current and an ideal state and offers a means of removing the discrepancy through Jihad. Following this view, the Hamas Charter sets the goal to protect the so-called “Moslem land” and justifies its ideology in the name of God. The symbols of prejudice such as *The Protocols of Zion* are presented as factual. The power of the Jews is further emphasized by holding them responsible for both world wars, the control of the international media, comparing them to the Nazis, and dehumanizing them. In addressing the problem of susceptibility to a monolithic terrorist ideology, alternate messages must be disseminated. However, studies show that a “monolithic culture” is often resistant to competing ideology as compared to democratic culture (Staub, 1989). Exploring the interplay of media and ideology and their implications for reconciliation efforts are an important, and necessary endeavor for the future.

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