Executive Summary

The Devoted Actor, Sacred Values, and Willingness to Fight: Preliminary Studies with ISIL Volunteers and Kurdish Frontline Fighters

Recent and ongoing research in conjunction with the U.S. Dept. of Defense MINERVA Initiative Presented to the Strategic Multilayer Assessment of ISIL in Support to SOCCNET, Nov. 2014.

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1. Who Joins ISIL Today?

- More than 15000 foreign fighters have joined the jihad in Syria over the last three years, about 20 percent from Europe. Since 1945, only the Afghanistan conflict in the 1980s has mobilized more foreign fighters than this conflict, and that was over a period of ten years. It is likely, then, that the Syrian conflict if not ended soon – a distant prospect -- will mobilize the greatest number of foreign fighters in modern history.

- The networks being formed among these fighters now likely will be decisive for future terrorist attacks against Western countries, given that the networks formed during the 1980s jihad in Afghanistan were vital for the attacks committed against the West in the early to mid-2000s.

- Western volunteers for ISIL are mostly self-seeking young adults in transitional stages in their lives – immigrants, students, between jobs or girl friends, having left their native homes and looking for new families of friends and fellow travelers. For the most part they have no traditional religious education and are “born again” into a radical religious vocation through the appeal of militant jihad.¹

- In our studies of al-Qaeda volunteers from the diaspora we find about 70-75% join AQ and its affiliates through friends, about 15-20% through family, and the rest through other means (discipleship, on their own, etc.). The Foreign Fighter database from ICSR (International Centre for the Study of Radicalisation, King’s College, London) indicates very similar numbers for volunteers to Syria and Iraq, mostly to ISIL.²

- A July 2014 poll by ICM Research suggests that 16 percent of people in France, and more than one in four youth (27 percent), have a favorable or very favorable opinion of ISIL, although only about 7 percent of France is Muslim.³

- Dialoguing with foreign fighters on social media (e.g., ask.fm) indicates that the principal cause motivating the first wave of foreign fighters was tightly linked to a humanitarian concern to end the apparent genocide by Assad’s government against Sunni Muslims; and the volunteers were confused and upset by the unwelcoming locals they were supposedly coming to save. However, for about a year now the narrative and cause has shifted markedly among a second wave towards fight for the Caliphate and Sharia show little concern for local sentiment. For the most part, current volunteers from Europe and North Africa believe that they are part of a great historical movement that has reestablished the Islamic Caliphate, and now must fight to the death if necessary to secure and expand it against Alawite and Shi’ite apostates in Damascus and Baghdad, then move to take Medina and Mecca, Jerusalem and Cairo, from the Jews and corrupt Sunni regimes and the foreign powers that support them.

- The case is different for ISIL fighters from Syria and Iraq who appear to be motivated more by instrumental concern and grievance: reaction to the power and perceived abuse that the Alawites and
Shi’tes have exercised over them and a fervent desire to turn the situation on its head, fear and hatred of Iran (especially among former Baathist military) and belief that Iran’s nuclear program is primarily aimed at them, and support for ISIL because they think it is winning.4

Yet, despite the disparate motives of those joining ISIL, in the end the foreign fighters who come mainly for adventure with their friends, whether to save Syria or secure the Caliphate, as well as local fighters who join for material advantage or to avenge hate, have radicalized together in combat into a formidable fighting force. And here ISIL leadership appears to be critical: Al-Baghdadi and company are able to manage very different groups and bring them to devotion their sacred cause: a Caliphate hallowed by combat, caring for one another under fire and partaking of blood rituals that tightly bind a band of brothers while terrorizing enemies. Foreign fighter sentiment suggests that Bin Laden is akin to John the Baptist in preaching the Caliphate’s coming, but al-Baghdadi is a messiah who has made it true.

Thus, prior interrogation of Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi (now self-proclaimed “Caliph” of the Islamic State) and his close circle by ARTIS associate General Douglas Stone, who commanded Camp Bucca where they were held, indicates “absolutely committed purists, completely devoted to their idea of Sharia and the Caliphate, and willing to do anything for it, to use violence to instill blood lust among their followers and terror among enemies who were no match for them, and to build trusted networks among Baathist military officers. They are ruthless, and patient, and 5 steps ahead of their enemies.”

In our preferred world of open democracy, tolerance of diversity and distributive justice, violence – especially extreme forms of mass bloodshed – are generally considered pathological or evil expressions of human nature gone awry, or collateral damage as the unintended consequence of righteous intentions. But across most human history and cultures violence against other groups is universally claimed by the perpetrators to be a sublime matter of moral virtue. For without a claim to virtue, it is very difficult to endeavor to kill large numbers of people innocent of direct harm to others.

2. The Devoted Actor: “Fighting Spirit” and Willingness to Die and Kill.

What inspires the willingness of humans to make their greatest exertions, to fight unto death with and for genetic strangers – a propensity to which no creature but humans is subject? What determines the “fighting spirit” that enables one group of combatants to defeat another, all other things being equal? And what allows revolutionary and insurgent groups to survive and rebound in the face of seemingly catastrophic losses in infrastructure, firepower, manpower and leadership? These are basic questions about human nature and warfare that our research endeavors to address through a combination of anthropological fieldwork, psychological experiments and surveys in select trouble spots of worry to national and international security.

These issues bear directly on some of our military’s current and most pressing concerns. For example, in recent remarks, President Obama5 endorsed the judgment of his U.S. National Intelligence Director: “We underestimated the Viet Cong… we underestimated ISIL [the Islamic State] and overestimated the fighting capability of the Iraqi army…. It boils down to predicting the will to fight, which is an imponderable.”6 Yet, if the methods and results that our research suggest prove reliable and right, then predicting who is willing to fight and who isn’t, and why, could be ponderable indeed, and important to the evaluation and execution of military strategy.

Among American military historians, psychologists and sociologists the conventional wisdom on why soldiers fight is because of leadership and, even more important, group loyalty resembling love of family but perhaps even stronger.7 They tend to chalk up “the semi-mystical bond of comradeship” to rational self-interest,8 and to dismiss the notion of sacrifice for a cause as a critical factor in war. In Vietnam, for example, American soldiers told interviewers that the cause of democracy was “crap” and “a joke.” And yet, they described the selfless bravery of the Viet Cong and North Vietnamese “because they believed in something” and “knew what they were fighting for.”9 Perhaps, then, some do fight and die for a cause, as well as comrades, and that is why they win wars.10
- Our overall framework concerns “The Devoted Actor,” who is a moral agent markedly different from most notions of rational agent, who is fairly immune to material tradeoffs, and whose character we have been researching and composing over the last several years. Our research indicates that when people act as “Devoted Actors” they are deontic actors (i.e., duty-based) who add another dimension to thought and behavior that is distinct from instrumental rationality (i.e., cost-benefit). We find that devoted actors who are unconditionally committed to comrades, in conjunction with their sacred cause, allow low-power groups to endure and often prevail against materially stronger foes. Thus, since World War 1, revolutionary and insurgent groups (e.g., Bolshevists, Nazis, Viet Cong, IS) have beaten foes with up to an order of magnitude initial more firepower and manpower because of devotion to comrade and cause rather than to typical reward structures like pay and promotion.

- In our previous DoD-supported work involving in-depth case and field studies of jihadi terrorist groups, of how they developed and how their attacks germinated, we also find that militants kill and die “for each other… their imagined family of genetic strangers—their brotherhood”; however, our studies of seemingly intractable conflicts (Israel-Palestine, Iran-USA, India-Pakistan) also show that they do so for a sacred cause.

- Our research indicates that when people act as “Devoted Actors” they act in ways that cannot be reliably predicted by assessing material risks and rewards, costs and consequences. Devoted actors act are not chiefly motivated by instrumental concerns. Instead, they are motivated by “sacred values”—as when land becomes “Holy Land”-- that drive actions independent, or all out proportion, to likely outcomes.

3. An Empirical Illustration: Probable factors motivating ISIL volunteers from Morocco.

To illustrate the relationship between sacred values, identity fusion of individual self concepts into a unique collective concept, and willingness to fight, I briefly report results of surveys in two Moroccan neighborhoods (N = 260, face-to-face interviews, 50% males, M_age = 31 yrs). Both places were previously associated with militant jihad, and where we had done intensive anthropological fieldwork: Jemaa Mezuak (a rundown barrio of Tetuan, home to 5 of 7 principal plotters in the 2004 Madrid train bombings who blew themselves up when cornered by police, and to a number of suicide bombers who died in Iraq), and Sidi Moumen in Casablanca (a densely populated shantytown, source of terrorist bombing campaigns in 2003, 2005, 2007). Upwards of 2000 Moroccans have joined jihadi groups in Syria, primarily the Islamic State, and our field discussions with Moroccan officials indicate that scores of volunteers are now leaving monthly from northern Moroccan towns such as Tetuan and Larache. Systematic analysis of dialogues in social media among hundreds of foreign fighters over the last three years indicates a marked shift in motivations during the last year from saving co-religionists in Syria to establishing Sharia and securing the Caliphate regardless of the wishes of local folk. Moroccan volunteers conform to the pattern.

As previously with al-Qaeda volunteers from the diaspora, about 3 out of every 4 of foreign fighters in Syria volunteer in clusters of friends, some attuned to the cause through social media and arriving in groups, and some being drawn to the cause by friends already in place or who have returned to their point of origin. Results indicate that fusion with family-like groups may be driving costly sacrifices for the sake of comrades and cause (Sharia and the Caliphate) among foreign fighter volunteers, but only for those who hold a sacred value. When sacred values are at the core of motivations to make extreme sacrifices, it becomes clear how people can sustain commitment and continue to fight. This is so even when most of the group they were fused with has perished, as Darwin intimated in The Descent of Man when discussing heroism and martyrdom under low initial probability of victory or even group survival.

Figures 1A and 1B show that two factors, identity fusion and sacred values, interact to determine who is likely to become a devoted actor based on expressions of willingness to make costly sacrifices, including fighting and dying (aggregate of 5 items: “If necessary, I would be willing to lose my job or source of income/go to jail/use violence/let my children suffer physical punishment/die to defend the full imposition of Sharia/Democracy,” where 1 = “strongly disagree” to 7 =”strongly agree,” Cronbach’s α = .94).
**Only those subjects who were fused with a family-like group and considered Sharia a sacred value were more willing than not to make costly sacrifices**, being above the midpoint of a 7-point response scale from strongly unwilling to strongly willing. We found a similar effect for support of militant Jihad (5 items, e.g., “All countries that are not ruled by Muslims and do not observe Sharia should be considered Dar al-Harb [abode of war],” same response scale, $\alpha = .90$): Although an interaction between fusion and sacred values also predicts costly sacrifices holds when values concern democracy (using various measures of “democracy,” including tolerance of diverse opinion, individual liberty, independent judiciary, competitive elections, etc.), effects are much weaker and less widespread in these Moroccan populations. By contrast, in a survey of 1465 Spaniards: only when asked to think about the day of the March 2004 Madrid train bombings (threat prime as compared to a control condition), did fusion with the country (rather than close friends) and democracy considered as a sacred value interact in: expressed willingness for costly sacrifices, perception of the in-group (Spaniards) as strong and the out-group (Muslims) as weak (e.g., a condition x fusion with country x SVs repeated measures MANOVA on intergroup formidability yielded a three-way interaction, $F (1,1439) = 8.38, p = .004$).

**Sample Fusion Measure:** The diagram below (fig. 2) consists of two circles. The small circle represents you (I) and the big circle represents your [close circle of friends/religion/country]. You can click on the small circle and move it closer to the big circle (dragging it to the right) or you can move it away from the big circle (dragging it to the left). Please move the small circle to the position that best captures your relationship with [close circle of friends/religion/country].

**Sample Outcome Measure (Intergroup Formidability):** In the above diagram (fig. 3) are two human bodies that represent the strength of two groups: Spaniards and Muslims. You can increase or decrease independently the size and strength of both bodies to indicate to what extent you believe a group is stronger or weaker than another.

4. **Ongoing ARTIS (Self-Funded) Studies with Kurdish fighters on the Frontlines in Mosul.**

Our self-funded studies aim to assess the fighting spirit of the various Kurdish forces and as their perceptions of what is needed to defeat ISIL. We use experimental designs and measures similar to those described above. However, we are in mid-study and cannot report statistical details as yet, only apparent trends.
Beginning in the fall of 2014, we have been conducting research with various Kurdish combatant groups (primarily PKK, PUK, KDP and Communist Peshmergas, and the Iraqi Army), and non-combatant controls, on the frontlines in the fight with ISIL around Mosul. “Peshmerga” is used in common parlance to mean any Kurdish fighter, official or not. The Ministry of Peshmergas (i.e., Ministry of Defense) sees things differently: any Peshmerga from the battles of the 1980s and 90s or earlier automatically have a place in the government’s force. Then there are separate groups that are party-affiliated: if you want to fight, you go to your party to join a particular group. This greatly affects the structure of command and coordination. Although our interviewees try to give an impression of unity, when pushed most admit it doesn’t work too well. Who is ultimately in control? Who coordinates the action across the 1,050 miles of frontline? Why does, when a PUK detachment get sent to Makhmour, does a KDP contingent get sent to the PUK area? Who decides? To these questions we do not yet have clear answers.

With the mortal threat of ISIL hovering over the Kurds, the question is to what extend the Islamic State has unified the Kurdish factions in Iraq, or in what is known as the “Greater Kurdistan” Including Kurdish factions from Turkey, Syria and Iran) in Kurdish national discourse? The short answer so far is: “Not very much.” A member of the elite Republican Guard who, under condition of anonymity, told us that the ongoing conflict between the PUK and KPD has allowed ISIL to retake territory they had lost around Jalawla after they had won it, though greatly outnumbered, with snipers, creative tactics and bravery. The British army is now in the area to help with training, which he and others think will make a difference as there is considerable respect for the training and fighting and discipline of the Brits.

Yet, most young people we have talked to express willingness to help in the fight however and with whomever they can. Many are desperate to fight but will settle for taking food to the front. The PKK are refusing most volunteers: not for political reasons, but because PKK combat success depends on tight military discipline and close comraderie forged over time. Nevertheless, they do let some very experienced Peshmerga join them. The PKK also took in 15 communists into one unit fighting at Makhmour when the Communist Party forbade fighting (degrading support for communists in the general population). The PKK has strict rules in times of relative calm. One such rule is that the parent of a martyr must be spared from fighting. When a member of our team interviewed the father of a martyr who was refused on these grounds and went back to Makhmour, he cried with shame. Then his wife joined up with the PKK without telling them she had lost a son; his daughter was already with them (he hates the PUK with a passion and would not re-join this group although he had previously fought with them). Finally, a contingent of communists in Makhmour who were fighting alongside the KDP let the man in to fight without informing party leaders.

People consider the PKK the very best fighters, but the fighting prowess of the PUK Peshmergas is also well regarded. The KDP has been deeply disregarded following its failure to prevent ISIL from taking Mosul and leaving the Christians and Yazidi to their fates, then watching the battle for Makhmour, returning to Erbil at night and only fighting when Erbil was threatened. A few KDP battalions are now re-gaining respect. Most people believe that the PKK, helped by some older Peshmergas, prevented Erbil from falling and eventually of all of Kurdish Iraqi territory. One critical problem of the Iraqi Kurdish army is that, for the sake of appearance of political unity, if a unit as a PUK leader it must also have a KUP vice-leader and vice versa. This paralyzes rather than unifies.

Crucially, people don’t seem that intimidated by ISIL. Most respondents contend that it would not take long if the international community would help with new weapons. They believe that if the PKK and Peshmerga swapped arms with ISIL, then ISIL would be defeated in a matter of weeks.

But literally for every Kurd we have interviewed so far – from whatever faction, combatant or not, man or woman, rich or poor, well-educated or functionally illiterate – the greatest perceived challenge to victory over ISIL is lack of unity. Everyone bemoans this lack of unity yet no one foresees unity in the near term. So a new Salah ed-Din (the Kurdish warrior chief who liberated Jerusalem from the Crusaders) would be welcome who could unite the Kurdish people and raise a Muslim army that would destroy ISIL while helping secure the dream of a unified Kurdistan. The problem is that the PUK and KDP have also divided history, each claiming certain heroes as their own, and so cannot really imagine a leader that commands unity.
In sum, despite the persistent fragmentation of political and military command, there is a strong sentiment among Kurds throughout the area that unity is essential to destroying ISIL and ensuring the long-term survival of the Kurds as a people. As our studies are beginning to show, willingness to fight and die for the sacred value of Kurdish unity, and sentiments of fusion with Kurdistan, trump even family and close comrades in producing expressions of willingness to make costly sacrifices, including fighting and dying. Indeed, many young volunteers are coming to the front asking to fight with any group that will take them. But

- No Kurdish respondents want an American army on the ground to try to do the job for them.

5. General Summary: Theory and Hypothesis.

- Much prior research indicates that close comraderie with a family-like group (band of brothers) is critical to the “fighting spirit” of combatants, and recent studies among combatants (in Libya)\(^\text{18}\) and supporters of militant Jihad (in Morocco)\(^\text{19}\) suggest that identity fusion is a key mechanism, providing a sense of invincibility and special destiny to the group and motivating willingness to make costly sacrifices, including fighting and dying.

- Yet, historical studies (of the American Revolutionary and Civil Wars, the Lincoln Brigade of American volunteers in the Spanish Civil War, the Viet Cong and North Vietnamese) and our own preliminary studies of foreign volunteers for ISIL and frontline Kurds fighting ISIL indicate that for some groups, commitment to sacred values ratchets up fusion and fighting spirit beyond the close family-like group to an extended ideological group defined by a sacred cause (Advancing The Caliphate, Defending The Kurdish People).

Thus we propose the following hypothesis (for which we have some preliminary support):

*If sacred values are more strongly associated with a larger group, then combatants will fuse with that larger group and consider that larger group, defined by its sacred cause, to be what they are most willing to defend and fight for, even unto death.*

By researching this process we hope to provide both a mechanism for fusion extension beyond close “bands of brothers/sisters” to larger groups, as well as an account of why ideologically committed revolutionary and insurgent groups beat out armies and police that also have committed brothers in arms at the small family-like group level (commando units, special forces), but lack the more overarching unity and commitment.

*Even from our initial studies it is clear that both ISIL foreign fighter volunteers and Kurdish frontline fighters exhibit this wider fusion and commitment, whereas the Iraqi and Syrian armies likely do not.*

6. Implications for Current Strategy: Cost-imposition upon the enemy likely won’t work, and even backfire.

- Arguably the most memorable conclusion in the 9/11 Report was that America suffered such a disastrous attack because of a "failure of imagination" at all key levels of government. Are we suffering from a similar problem today? Not that there is any shortage of speculation about apocalyptic plots. But there may be a real failure to think our way into the heads of the enemy from a psychological and ideological point of view and also, perhaps more importantly, from a practical and tactical vantage. Clearly Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi "imagined" his caliphate and moved to make it real long before most in the West were able to grasp what this entailed. What do we imagine he imagines now in his war with America? ...

- *If we consider successive iterations of the U.S. Defense Department’s Quadrennial Defense Review, the central concept is “strategic planning” focused on seeking what could be termed a “cost-imposing” strategy: lessening costs to our side while making costs unsustainable for adversaries. This, of course, is a throwback to the realpolitik of the 19th and 20th century European nation-state struggles, and up through the US-Soviet Cold War rivalry.*
Yet, as Tom Schelling (the Nobel economist) warned in *The Strategy of Conflict* in 1960, this wasn’t even a reliably good national security for nation states: “If we confine study to the theory of strategy, we seriously restrict ourselves by the assumption of rational behavior—not just of intelligent behavior, but of behavior motivated by a conscious calculation of advantages, a calculation that in turn is based on an explicit and internally consistent value system. We thus limit the applicability of any results we reach. If our interest is the study of actual behavior, the results we reach under this constraint may prove to be either a good approximation of reality or a caricature.”

**The U.S. has certainly tried to formulate an internally consistent value system, namely, a utilitarian “cost-imposition” strategy.** The problem is that it’s unclear whether that’s actually a good approximation for what the U.S. itself is about (although there is a good argument to be made that utilitarian calculations can be of overriding importance in many contexts). More important, however, is that its patently not the same value system, or mix of value systems, that our adversaries think about and act upon. Our empirical evidence shows clearly that for value-driven groups, cost imposition strategies are more likely than not to fail, and even backfire.

Of course, it is necessary to understand the instrumental calculations and requirements of friend and foe alike. With regard to ISIL, there seem to be two components to its success: managerial organization and value-driven vision. On the instrumental-managerial side, a Minerva project led by Princeton’s Jake Shapiro has data from U.S. military raids showing that the managerial structure of AQ in Mesopotamia remained fairly intact during the surge in Iraq, despite 60-80 percent loss in operational personnel, and despite having 40 to 50 of their high-valued targets hit every month for 15 consecutive months. This structure was able to take root in Syria owing to the tacit alliance that Assad made with ISIL to fight the Free Syrian Army. ISIL was able to establish a territorial base in Syria, which served as a safe haven from actions against them in Iraq, and them to exploit more lucrative sources of revenue: In Syria, oil refineries were not well defended, and Assad even paid off ISIL to keep the oil flowing; ISIL then returned to Iraq along the 1990s oil-for-smuggling routes that had enabled the Baathist regime to remain afloat in the face of international sanctions.

The second, less understood component of ISIL success is its “vision,” and most importantly the sacred cause of the Caliphate. This is often viewed in Western military, policy and popular media circles as simply bizarre and opaque to reasoned analysis. Such a view precludes insight into how ISIL organization, tactics and strategy are tethered to cause of the Caliphate; for example, in appreciating that ISIL’s managerial structure is only a tool for securing the Caliphate by establishing a concrete territorial and financial infrastructure. It is precisely the power of messianic values and ideals that enables ISIL to exercise extreme violence, and even suffer it, without remorse or fear and with utter confidence in eventual victory, however improbable. That belief and commitment is likely key to why a hodgepodge of people of mixed nationalities and mostly strangers to one another is able to defeat police and armies with an order of magnitude greater firepower and manpower.

Even more overwhelming firepower may be able to defeat ISIL in the end (as it did the Nazis in WWII), but then an alternative moral vision still will be needed to fill the void lest radical Islam, with its clear conception of moral virtue, arise again as a powerful force.

Democracy has been historically very poor at adjudicating across confessional boundaries, which dominate in Syria and Iraq, and local peoples clearly do not want to see America or any outside power again trying to impose its norms. Neither are appeals to “moderate Islam” likely to work inasmuch as the call to adventure and glory is critical to mobilizing the younger generations to make costly sacrifices for or against ISIL.

The heroes, armies and sacred ideals needed to defeat ISIL, and radical Islam in general, will very likely have to come from within the Muslim communities threatened by ISIL. Currently, there are many millions of Muslims who vehemently oppose ISIL and the brutal current in Islam that it represents. We might do well to support rather than attempt to direct their autochthonous yearnings and development with arms, information and ideas, and relinquish control to vanquish.
Bond, M (2014) Why westerners are driven to join the jihadist fight. (New Scientist, September 10).