



**Artical Name :** Unintended Consequences

**Artical Subject :** Is Trump Fueling ISIS Extremist Narratives?

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Donald Trump promised in many of his statements to “utterly destroy ISIS” and other extremist organizations in the shortest possible time. He stated that this would be the priority of his administration, which will be achieved through increasing cooperation with Middle Eastern allies, as well as intensifying attacks against ISIS, expanding intelligence cooperation, and drying up their funding sources. Despite the fact that the previously mentioned approaches will curb the power of extremist groups in the short term, some analysts have raised major concerns about Trump’s approach in the long run. How will Donald Trump’s administration and its policies lead to a reverse effect in the long term? In other words, the Trump administration’s policies may contribute to further radicalization of terrorist groups, strengthening their moral and psychological power, rather than weakening them. This will be due to adopting right-wing politics that feed the political narrative of terrorist organizations, allowing them to appeal to their target audience. The Extremist Narrative Although there is no consensus over the definition of “extremist narrative”, in this article it refers to the account or story adopted and promoted by violent groups, whether to their own members within the organization, their target audience, or the broader community. Just as any social group has its own narrative, religious and terrorist insurgent groups have their narrative stemming from their beliefs of fanatic ideologies, and rigid interpretation of holy texts belonging to a classical literary tradition. Such interpretations are fused with their own version of Islamic history, as well as the contemporary political and social realities of the Muslim World. Through this social narrative, these extremist organizations present themselves in opposition to the “other”. This narrative justifies these organizations’ existence, behavior, goals, aspirations, methods, and tactics in a manner that seeks to present terrorist organizations as coherent and homogenous as possible. Accordingly, such discourse will enable terrorist organizations to appeal and recruit new members, ensure their allegiance and commitment through maintaining a sense of belonging, and encourage them to sacrifice in service of their cause. The Narrative and Religious Violence The financial and military dimensions in combating terrorism are as significant as theoretically recognizing the two main roles of the extremist narrative. First is the establishment of the religious group and its introduction into the persistent vicious cycle of violence, and the difficulty of isolating it. The second is the enhancement of the terror group’s manpower, and an increase in sympathy for their cause. Two theoretical approaches can be used to assess the functions of this extremist narrative: The First Approach: The Establishment and Sustainability of Violent Religious Groups The significance of the extremist narrative becomes apparent in context of social comparisons adopted by various ideological groups. Famous theorists of social psychology such as Henri Tajfel and John Toner in the 1970s stipulated that an ideological group may resort to violence through a comparison that such a group will make between its own social identity, with another group of corresponding identity. This comparison might be based on a hierarchical ranking, where one group perceives itself unjustly demoted within that hierarchy and thus will try to change its ranking. Other groups aim to distinguish themselves in order to preserve their unique identity, as well as their members’ sense of belonging. Here, the extremist narrative becomes prominent within the framework of social comparison as an effective means for solidifying the identities of

individuals and their sense of belonging. The narrative may also serve as an instigator for engaging the group in violent actions, as a means of confronting the “other” in order to change their status quo. Such a status quo may be based on injustice and persecution, whether in reality or perception.

**The Second Approach: Representation and Regeneration** In his book *Violent Non-State Actors: From Anarchists to Jihadists* Ersel Aydinli grants a leading role to what he calls the process of “representation and regeneration”, for determining the strength of violent non-state actors such as al-Qaeda and ISIS. Unlike tangible military and financial capabilities of terrorist groups, the representation and regeneration approach focuses on the membership within terrorist groups through understanding the merits of belonging to these groups. This approach further examines their capacity to maintain their original members and recruit new ones, or in other words regenerate themselves in the form of successive generations. When studying these previous two elements, the significance of the extremist discourse becomes evident as terrorist groups utilize such a discourse using various means to target their own members and the society. The power of that narrative and its ability to win the hearts and minds of its current members, or those it seeks to recruit from mainstream society, play a significant role in determining the terror groups’ ability to exert influence. Such influence can be inflicted on their supporters either in centralized or decentralized forms, or through inspiration, or even through promoting sympathy for these groups when they are suffering under the barrage of military assaults.

**The Injustice Narrative: Al-Qaeda and ISIS** Despite the relative ideological differences between extremist groups such as al-Qaeda and ISIS, there is a common narrative embraced by their members. Such a narrative is centered upon their understanding of the political and social realities of Muslims around the world. There seems to be a common inherited narrative in the reading of the political and social realities of Muslims in the world, adopted by these organizations, and launched to their target audience of members or sympathizers, with some secondary differences. This narrative implies that resorting to violence is not only a matter of carrying out a religious duty to regain Islam’s lost glory via the establishment of Sharia and the alleged Caliphate; but rather, to alleviate a historical injustice inflicted upon Islam and Muslims by non-Muslims. According to their discourse, non-Muslims are often addressed as “Jews and Crusaders”, and are portrayed as having sought to dominate the riches of Muslim lands and humiliate them. Therefore, the obligation of Jihad is promoted in a world that extremist groups divide into “Dar al-Islam”, the “Abode of Islam”, and “Dar al-Harb”, the “Abode of War”. This division is not just based on an ideological view predicated upon interpretations of sacred texts and a classical jurisprudential tradition. It is also based on a historical narrative encompassing the past and the present, a narrative that is connected with present-day events as embodied by two major phenomena:

- 1- The Occupation of Muslim Lands: The narrative of extremist groups, which is targeted towards mainstream Muslims, often focuses on historical and current occupations of Muslim lands by the “infidel” West. One of the main manifestations of this phenomenon is the Israeli occupation of Palestine, where the holy city of Jerusalem is situated with all of its symbolic religious and historical significance. Jerusalem is the third holiest city in Islam. The city houses the Aqsa mosque, which was the first designated ‘Qibla’ (direction of prayer) for Muslims. The Israeli occupation embodies the historical injustice perceived by Muslims and terrorist groups portray this injustice as being the pinnacle of “Jewish-Crusader” collaboration against Islam.

Extremist groups often portray the current occupations as extensions of the Crusades, which were waged between the eleventh and fourteenth centuries. The American invasion of Afghanistan in 2001, Iraq in 2003 and the resulting empowerment of Shiites in Iraq are events portrayed by extremists as evidence for injustices suffered by Sunni Muslims who have been subjected to invasion, humiliation, and the plundering of their resources.- 2- The Threats Targeting Muslims: The common factor in the extremist narrative adopted by terror groups includes the propagation of the idea that Sunni Muslims are being targeted by “Crusaders”, either directly or indirectly. According to extremists, this targeting is only religiously motivated.

In his 2014 study, Issac Kfir focuses on the role of the “threat” and “targeting” at the heart of the extremist narrative, a narrative that played a massive role in the evolvement of ISIS as a more violent bloodthirsty generation, deviated away from al-Qaeda’s womb after the US invasion of Iraq.

The ISIS narrative has appealed to Muslim youth not only from Syria and Iraq, but also many Arab and foreign countries. Researcher Shiraz Maher describes the ISIS-driven conflict through the maximum and unprecedented utilization of social media to disseminate its narrative to a broader audience. To promote their cause, their narrative aimed to spread claims of the mass atrocities committed against Sunnis in Iraq, during the rule of the American-backed al-Maliki government. It also portrays the crimes of Bashar

al-Assad and his Iranian-backed regime, after the onset of the Syrian revolution, as a Shiite "Rafida" assault against Syrian Sunnis. The term "Rafida", meaning "those who reject", is a common sectarian slur against Shiites, who are portrayed in the Syrian context as being a ruling minority targeting the Sunni majority with Western complicity. Thus, the ISIS narrative became highly appealing to wide segments of Muslim youth, which led to the emergence of a new generation of Jihadists different from their predecessors, especially al-Qaeda. Some of the new generation act upon being an organizational member in a terrorist organization, while others act upon their inspiration and faith in that narrative such as the lone wolves. The new generation inherited a narrative that is sought to be more inspirational and influential rather than the 'traditional' Jihadist narrative.

The Reverse Effect of Trump in Creating Extremism With Donald Trump assuming the office of US President, the extremist narrative of groups like al-Qaeda and ISIS is liable to spread and thrive, drawing new adherents. The allure and appeal of such narrative will not simply be based on extremism, but will be further bolstered by the global political context in which the US plays an active role. The US has the ability to affect the course of events through its political administration. Such an impact will be shaped by the policies of the administration as well as the statements issued by its officials, which is clear when assessing the following: 1- A Divisive Worldview: The right-wing Trump administration does

not conceal its opposition to globalization. This is partially driven from an implicit belief in the "Clash of Civilizations" concept promoted by Samuel Huntington. He argued that the post-Cold War conflicts would not be triggered by ideological or political differences between countries, but rather between various civilizations, cultures and identities. Accordingly, the conflict between the Islamic and Western civilizations resembles the clash of civilizations. During his campaign, Trump's statements appeared to divide the world between the West and Muslims, in a manner compatible with the narrative of Muslim fanatics. Trump compounded this by often ignoring any distinctions between conservative rigid extremist interpretation of Islam and the moderate one.

Trump issued numerous controversial statements, such as his infamous observation "I think Islam hates us." <!--[if !supportFootnotes]-->[iv]<!--[endif]--> Trump's statements appear to be in line with the key players in his administration, such as Steve Bannon, the White House Chief Strategist. Bannon described Islam in 2014 as the extreme religion in the world, and divided the world into a Western Judeo-Christian block waging a savage and bloody conflict against

Islamofascist Jihadism. <!--[if !supportFootnotes]-->[v]<!--[endif]--> <!--[if !supportFootnotes]-->[vi]<!--[endif]--> 2- Anti-Muslim Policies: Since the announcement of his candidacy, Trump revealed his commitment to a set of policies, perceived as being discriminatory towards Muslims. It is likely that these policies, whether they remain unfulfilled promises or are actually implemented, will play an important role in fueling the extremist narrative. These policies confirm the terrorist discourse of injustice against Muslims, entailing that they are being both occupied and targeted. Thus, the extremist Muslims' division of the world into the "Abode of Islam" and the "Abode of War" becomes reminiscent of Trump's division of the world into the West and Islam. Reuters reported that an ISIS leader in November 2016 stated that Trump's worldview would make ISIS' mission much easier, facilitating the recruitment of thousands. <!--[if !supportFootnotes]-->[vii]<!--[endif]-->

The most eye-catching of policies of Trump administration is their position towards the Palestinian cause, being staunchly pro-Israel. This was evident in Trump's campaign promise to move the US embassy in Israel to Jerusalem, and an Israeli television station reported that an American Congressional delegation travelled to Israel to discuss this proposal. <!--[if !supportFootnotes]-->[viii]<!--[endif]--> Furthermore, Trump took a hostile position

towards the Security Council resolution condemning Israeli settlements, issued in December 2016. He further promised to reduce aid to international organizations supporting Palestinians, which was perceived by Netanyahu as a legitimate cover to expand and legalize settlements. The US President has also called for the establishment of a database on Muslims residing in the United States. He further issued an executive order, right after assuming presidency, banning Muslims from seven nationalities to enter the United States that was overturned by the Judiciary. Conclusion It appears that the policies and ideology of the new American President

sharply oppose his predecessor Barack Obama, who had attempted to target terrorists through smart power. The Obama administration sought to combine the tools of coercion and hard power, with an attempt to alleviate hostile Muslims feelings towards the United States. The Obama administration considered such hostility useful for terrorist recruitment. The dangers of Trump's policies is that they may thrive the narrative of religiously driven terror groups. The narrative may gain wider legitimacy and greater opportunities to trickle down to new generations of terrorists. This would

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increase terrorist recruitment, help terrorists gain more sympathy, and decentralize operations carried out by lone wolves. The claims of some terrorist entities about the division of the world across religious lines, and the persecution of Muslims solely for their religion, are now finding both implicit and explicit support in the new policies and rhetoric of the current United States administration.

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