

INCEPTION, PROPAGATION, REINVENTION: AN ANALYSIS OF DAESH’S IDEOLOGICAL APPROACH TO ISLAMIC FUNDAMENTALISM

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Abstract: This article examines DAESH's ideology, a key factor that has supported and facilitated the group's actions for militant recruitment, territorial control, and global expansion. I will present the current state of knowledge and risk assessment, then, by using a theoretical framework rooted in constructivism and military realism, I will synthesize more recent and complex ideas related to this group through interpretations of current knowledge developments. I aim to examine the propaganda presented by DAESH and highlight in a proper, clear form the distinction between Islam and the fundamentalist ideology promoted by the terrorist group. The aim is to show that through a captivating discourse, extremist, radical entities have the ability to attract militants, and that the need remains to combat the ideas promoted by them so that recruitment through religiously based ideology by maximizing the ignorance of the target audience can no longer be a feasible avenue to expand their base of supporters, or at least to be diminished so as not to be easily accomplished. The research aims to contribute to the literature by presenting the mechanisms used by DAESH, as well as presenting some strategies that can be applied by the authorities regarding the prevention of radicalization. Among the main elements identified by this study are: DAESH used a truncated message of the Qur'an to legitimize its actions, used emotionally impactful images to attract foreign Muslims to join the fighting in Syria and Iraq, and presented in a graphic and exaggerated manner their successes in the field to attract young combatants. The study has relevant implications and contributes to efforts to combat the actions of extremist-terrorist groups that claim their legitimacy from Islam.

Keywords: ideology, ISIS, Islam, Iraq, Syria, terrorism, Islamic fundamentalism



Rezumat: Acest articol cercetează ideologia DAESH, un factor esențial care a sprijinit și facilitat acțiunile grupării pentru recrutarea de militanți, control teritorial și extindere globală. În cadrul analizei, voi prezenta stadiul curent al cunoașterii, voi utiliza teoriile politice – constructivismul și realismul militar pentru a sintetiza ideile noi și complexe prin interpretări și dezvoltări ale cunoașterii actuale. Urmăresc să analizez propaganda promovată de DAESH și să prezint într-o formă adecvată, clara distincție dintre Islam și ideologia promovată de gruparea teroristă. Scopul este de a arată că printr-un discurs

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captivant, entități extremiste, radicale, au capacitatea de a atrage militanți, iar necesitatea rămâne aceea de a combate ideile promovate astfel încât recrutarea prin ideologie fundamentată religios prin maximizarea necunoașterii publicului țintă să nu mai poată fi realizată, sau cel puțin să nu poată fi realizată cu ușurință. Cercetarea urmărește să aducă contribuții la literatura de specialitate prin prezentarea mecanismelor utilizate de DAESH, precum și prin prezentarea unor strategii care pot fi aplicate de autorități în privința prevenirii radicalizării. Printre principalele elemente identificate în urma acestei cercetări se numără: DAESH a utilizat trunchiat mesajul Coranului pentru a-și legitima acțiunile, a folosit imagini cu impact emoțional pentru a atrage musulmani străini care să se alăture luptelor din Siria și Irak și a prezentat într-o manieră grafică și exagerată succese în teren pentru a atrage tineri combatanți. Studiul are implicații relevante și contribuie la demersurile de combatere a acțiunilor grupărilor extremist-teroriste care își reclamă legitimitatea din Islam.

Cuvinte cheie: ideologie, ISIS, Islam, Irak, Siria, terorism, fundamentalism islamic

I. Introduction

The present research focuses on the DAESH's ideology, a key factor that has supported and facilitated the group's recruitment actions. New and comprehensive ideas will be synthesized through interpretations and developments of current knowledge. The research contributes to a better understanding of the social balance in a global society strongly divided by religious, political, gender, age, sexual orientation, and other cleavages. The theoretical contributions aim to update the literature on the topic, while the practical ones focus on the need to strengthen the mechanisms that will allow us to correctly identify the radical, extremist orientation and distinguish between religious zealotry and terrorism.

The ideological basis of DAESH will be documented and the assertions of the terrorist group claiming its legitimacy in Islam will be analyzed in order to determine their authenticity: how true are these claims? Or rather, are they a manipulation attempt to provide the group with a recruitment pool as large as possible from within the Sunni Muslim community. The methodological approach is developed through the lenses of constructivism and military realism, assessing its aims to build a state, while using armed force to achieve its goals given that its ideology is developed around these objectives.

It is important to emphasize from the beginning that DAESH rejects any form of organization and structure that regulates international relations, as the group was directly interested in eliminating borders, governments, international

organizations, and thus, from this formless foundation, it sought to build a new state, a global state, namely the Islamic State.

Viewed from a constructivist perspective, DAESH was aiming to create a state of anarchy, which in Wendt's terms would appear along the following lines:

“Suppose that the processes of identity and interest formation have created a world in which states do not recognize rights to territory or existence – a war of all against everyone. [...] Anarchy has this meaning only by virtue of collective practices, which produce insecurity, but if those practices are relatively stable, they constitute a system that can resist change. That policy worlds are socially constructed, in other words, does not guarantee that they are malleable, for at least two reasons. The first reason is that, once constituted, any social system confronts each of its members as an objective social fact that reinforces certain behaviors and unlocks others. [...] The second reason is that systemic change may also be inhibited by actors' interests in maintaining relatively stable role identities. Such interests are rooted [...] in the desire to avoid the expected costs of violating commitments made to others”¹.

For DAESH, anarchy, policing between states, and the elimination of any powerful entity was beneficial, any context in which a group of states/entities organized and opposed it would have been an undesirable situation. The situation in Syria and Iraq had, for a time, the feeling of a disorganized war, in which all sides were fighting each other, while alliances were not sincere and were momentary. The two reasons indicated by Wendt are in such a conflictual relationship because the interactions between the members of a group involve the appreciation of some behaviors and their promotion, while at the same time, others will be discouraged, even punished. This approach was also adopted by DAESH, which through its security forces enforced rules, detained people, tried and executed non-compliant members.

Related to defensive / military realism, Waltz points out that:

“since some states can always resort to violence, all states must be willing to do the same – or to exist at the disposal of their militarily stronger neighbors. In the case of states, the state of nature is a state of war. This does not mean that war occurs constantly, but that, as each state decides for itself whether or not to use force, war can break out at any moment”².

¹ Alexander Wendt, “Anarchy is what States Make of it: The Social Construction of Power Politics”, *International Organization* 46, no. 2 (Spring 1992): 410-411.

² Kenneth N. Waltz, *Theory Of International Politics* (Iași: Polirom, 2006), 147.

What Waltz claims can be summed up by the Latin phrase *Si vis pacem, para bellum*. The author specifies that each state needs to be prepared for war, in case the neighbor or another state will attack it. DAESH was formed in conditions of war, under an asymmetric framework, as a non-state entity that declared war on Syria, Iraq, and the whole world.

A brief literature review reveals that DAESH is a mixed organization of jihadists from the Middle East, Afghanistan, Pakistan, the former Soviet Union, the Balkans, North and West Africa, which sought to impose its rules and values on the widest possible territory, regardless of the religious or political beliefs of the locals. DAESH recruited men to fight and govern occupied territories, recruited young women to become fighters' wives, recruited foreigners for propaganda purposes in psychological warfare and to prove that Islam (*our note*: actually, the ideology of DAESH, not the Islamic religion) is more attractive than materialistic culture. Colonization was part of ISIS ideology, doubled by multiple instances of human rights abuses and crimes against humanity (rape, slavery, torture, genocide)³.

II. Considerations on Ideology

When considering ideological concerns, we refer to the totality of philosophical, moral, religious ideas and conceptions, which reflects the interests and aspirations of certain categories in a given era. DAESH built an ideology that went beyond the level of manifesto, building a complex structure, which was based on Sunni religious concepts, local traditions, and customs of foreign fighters who had joined the organization. The conceptual purity it claimed was a propaganda tool, with the aim of flattening dissent in order to unify and eliminate differences, with an emphasis on eliminating inequalities, which was a strong argument for many militants who wanted to avoid feeling discriminated, like in Iraq, Syria, or their countries of origin.

DAESH is considered a “Salafist”⁴ jihadist group where, as Wagemakers explains, we are dealing with “a branch of Sunni Islam whose modern-day

³ Mark Bourrie, *The Killing Game: Martyrdom, Murder and the lure of ISIS / ISIS. Jocul morții. Martiri, asasinat și fascinație* (București: Corint, 2016); Scott Anderson, *Fractured Lands. How the Arab World Came Apart* (Crydon, UK: CPI Group, 2017); Jinan with Thierry Oberle, *Esclave de Daech* (Paris: FAYARD, 2014); Anna Erelle, *In the Skin of a Jihadist: Inside Islamic State's Recruitment Networks* (Iași: Polirom, 2015).

⁴ Loretta Napoleoni, *ISIS – The Terror Nation / ISIS. Califatul terorii* (București: Corint, 2015), 32.

adherents claim to emulate “the pious predecessors” (al-salaf al-ṣāliḥ; often equated with the first three generations of Muslims) as closely and in as many spheres of life as possible”⁵. Moreover, its three main types of Salafism are worth taking into consideration, given that it can be split into: *quietist Salafism* (“adherents shun political activism and concentrate on ‘cleansing’ and teaching Islam in all its ‘purity’”); *political Salafism* (“concentrate[s] on political commitment as an integral part of Islam through contentious debates, parliamentary participation, and founding political parties”); and *Jihadi-Salafism* (“whose followers seek to overthrow supposedly apostate regimes in the Muslim world through violent Jihad”)⁶. DAESH has advocated the need for an exclusively religious-political system, based on rules of the 7th and 8th centuries, a rather unachievable claim, as contemporary societies are structurally different, intrinsically dynamic, and marked by interconnectivity.

Napoleoni describes Salafism as: “a sect of Islam that adhered strictly to its doctrines”, emanating from “the 19th century as a reaction to European influence in the region”, it was “sometimes considered puritanical, often associated with Jihad”⁷. Meanwhile, modern Salafism is perceived as “a radical interpretation of Salafism. An extremely hostile movement to the West, which demands a return to the purity of Islam”⁸. DAESH’s statements on immersion in radical Salafism have helped the group attract funding from certain actors in the Middle East and in Gulf States. The radicals are more willing to pay their duty as per the *zakat*, as well as in addition to this amount, to join the cause and fight to the death against any entity considered hostile to their twisted interpretation of Islam⁹.

Napoleoni found that radical Salafism has become a form of reinventing the world according to the image of children lost in a complex and scary world, who consider themselves different and cannot integrate into society and the Caliphate thus became a Nirvana where they were entitled to a better life, where

⁵ Joas Wagemakers, “Salafism”, *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Religion*, August 5, 2016, <https://oxfordre.com/religion/view/10.1093/acrefore/9780199340378.001.0001/acrefore-9780199340378-e-255>, accessed February 7, 2022.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Loretta Napoleoni, *ISIS – The Terror Nation* (București: Corint, 2015), 135.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ The attraction was amplified by the sponsors’ belief that the financial support they offer will help redeem their sins, and DAESH offered this “ticket to salvation” through various methods of involvement, thus some chose the easy way to provide money for the fight, continuing their current activities, and promising important positions in the new structures for the financiers, if the group had succeeded.

the connection within the group was very strong and allowed them to easily lose themselves as individuals, becoming part of a functional unit. I agree with the Napoleoni's conclusion that a world full of dilemmas, challenges, unclear (or lacking) values, and confusion determines the appearance of a strong attraction towards purity, which creates the appearance that it offers a set of rules as well as stable conditions of existence and predictability.

DAESH is an extremist group that has tried to impose its interpretation of Islam through violent measures, while having a political purpose: to control and lead territories taken by force or by open association, while eliminating local traditions and reshaping the Middle East. It expressed, through radical actions, a deeply anti-humane attitude, which promoted the purity of practicing Sunnis (not apostates), for the purpose of justifying violence and genocide in the name of religion. In other words, radicalization involves the manifestation of a person in this form, where ideas are expressions of radical thoughts, and their radical nature implies a degree of actualization – in other words, of putting the respective ideas into practice. As Oliver Roy would argue, “There are no moderate religions, only moderate believers”¹⁰.

The major impact that DAESH had can also be attributed to the globalization of insecurity which has changed the way we interact; nowadays, ideology no longer has borders, it is not clearly defined, and its followers are changing faster than in the previous decades, let alone the last century. In the environment of extremist or terrorist groups, parallel speeches are promoted by leaders to expand the recruiting base, and if at first, the speech is too radical to attract fighters willing to sacrifice, over time, the speech will be diluted to attract engineers, doctors, programmers, etc., enabling the movement to move into the construction stage. Promoting a radical language creates influencers who manage to quickly and easily mobilize large groups of people, their followers, united by the emotion of belonging to the idea of the moment.

As defined by the Global Coalition¹¹, DAESH is a terrorist group, committing acts of violence to provoke widespread fear and achieve political goals. To obtain such an effect, various means and methods are utilized:

¹⁰ Olivier Roy, *Jihad and death: the global appeal of Islamic State* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017), 7.

¹¹ For the position of the Global Coalition on DAESH, consult: <https://theglobalcoalition.org/en/>. For the present analysis, I used UK's government assessment of DAESH being a terrorist group (UK Government, “Daesh: UK government response”, <https://www.gov.uk/government/topical-events/daesh>, accessed September 20, 2022).

disproportionately, the targets are chosen from the soft, civilian ones, the purpose being to determine inaction/action by putting pressure on the decision-makers through harming the populations they represent. Through its actions, DAESH sought to eliminate the leadership actors from the areas it managed to take control of and to devise a maneuver that would have supported the fighting and allowed it to take control of the capitals of Syria and Iraq. The group also wanted to instill fear in the European capitals, in the hope that it would lead to the withdrawal of troops from the conflict zone, under pressure from public opinion and voters.

UN Security Council Resolution 1566 (2004) states that terrorism represents “[...] criminal acts, including against civilians, committed with the intent to cause death or serious bodily injury, or taking of hostages, with the purpose to provoke a state of terror in the general [...]”¹². Through its actions, DAESH has committed itself to the spread of terrorism, destruction, and intimidation, without seeking to create a functional state entity. It used violence as a goal, not a means, with many followers being prepared for the ultimate sacrifice without it being in the fulfillment of a practical goal.

In all my interactions with Muslims¹³, I have been constantly reminded that Islam is a religion of peace and that DAESH does not represent the Muslim world. Its actions show that the Islamic State not only did not promote peace, but we would argue that these self-proclaimed adherents chose to commit such atrocities exactly because religion had nothing to do with their actual goals – the real reason was control, developing means of control and subdual through the use of Islamic religious concepts, interpreted in a convenient form for the group.

At first, the militants managed to present themselves as defenders of the moral values of Islam, with the aim of arousing admiration; later, they proved to be a group that sought control through fear and violence while suppress any intentions of revolt. Furthermore, when acting against local traditions, they justified any action as springing from the Qur’an or *hadith*, claiming to respect a pure form of Islam, such as that practiced in the time of the Prophet, but in fact, it promoted extremism, radicalism, and alienation from anything related to the modern society, classified as *impure*.

¹² United Nations Security Council, “Resolution 1566”, <https://www.un.org/ruleoflaw/files/n0454282.pdf>, accessed February 7, 2022.

¹³ Work related meetings with Islamic experts, in my capacity as a diplomat in Iraq, between 2013-2016.

The group told a story in which extremists became heroes, in a utopian society that offered the salvation of the soul strictly by performing actions requested by the caliph or his lieutenants. Promoting these concepts helped DAESH attract young people, especially Muslims, who had lived in Western countries for at least a generation and who had felt alienated, and were looking for a purpose, who wanted predictability and to belong to an entity that ensured all their rights, which they wanted because they could not accept the social contract from the countries that had offered them citizenship.

Graeme Wood considers that Turki Mubarak Abdullah Ahmad al-Binali was one of the most important ideologues of DAESH, and that his writings “show indifference to the worldly life of Muslims and infidels alike, hatred of idolatry and so pronounced intellectual stubbornness”¹⁴. What remains constant in all of DAESH’s ideological assessments is the domination of radicalism, extremism, hatred of various issues, including anything that would be considered non- or anti-Islamic, including a stoppage of all activities associated with research and intellectual development. The purpose of such an approach was to prevent any idea contrary to the promoted concepts and perceptions – since other sources of knowledge were considered harmful because they led to the whole current construct becoming unstable.

According to Mark Bourrie, DAESH believed that reintroducing slavery “in the Middle East is contributing to the fulfillment of the apocalyptic prophecies of ISIS. [...] writings say that before the last battle, *the slave will give birth to its master*”¹⁵. After all, slavery had and continues to have an obvious commercial purpose – slaves to be sold, to be used by DAESH members for domestic and sexual activities, to be used as trading currency, etc.

The DAESH broke away from Al Qaeda in Iraq, and its ideological basis which belonged to Abu Musab al-Zarqawi¹⁶. Al-Zarqawi’s main characteristic was his determination – although far from being a theologian, having, in fact, very little knowledge of Islam, he was able to impress strong feelings among his associates. Based on Zarqawi’s guidelines, the group created a fundamentalist framework of operations based on corrupted teaching of Islam, to achieve its immediate goals. Combining manipulation with perseverance and focusing on a clearly defined goal allowed this terrorist organization to perform at unprecedented levels in the post-September 11 world.

¹⁴ Graeme Wood, *The War of the end of Times* (Iași: Polirom, 2019), 65.

¹⁵ Bourrie, *The Killing Game*, 143.

¹⁶ Daniel Byman, *Al Qaeda, the Islamic State, and the Global Jihadist Movement. What Everyone Needs to Know* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 66.

Among the leading promoters of Jihad, terrorist groups are based on the ideas promoted by Sayyid Qutb, who stated that “it is the duty of Islam to annihilate all (non-Islamic) systems because they are obstacles to universal freedom”¹⁷. Qutb – the ideologue of Jihad in Afghanistan against the Soviet Union – argued that the political order needed to be an application of the divine system on earth, favoring, in fact, the annulment of all freedom. DAESH supported similar ideas and promoted an ideology that nullified freedoms and allowed the existence and manifestation of human experience strictly within a framework of rules defined or improvised according to the expertise or improvisation of the one applying the rules benefiting from the authority of the Caliphate.

Terrorist groups claiming to derive their ideology from Islam seek to defeat/eliminate Western powers and establish an Islamic state¹⁸, choosing to carry Jihad both on *Dar al-Islam* (the land of Islam) and on *Dar al-Kufr* (the land of the infidels/unfaithful). Sageman’s conclusion was just as relevant 10 years later, when in 2014, DAESH managed to conquer Mosul and declared that it would extend Jihad across the globe, with another stated goal being the conquest of Rome and the Vatican, obviously a goal full of symbolism, not necessarily a strategic location¹⁹. Today, moderate Muslims emphasize that Jihad is an inner struggle against temptations, thoughts that are contrary to the teachings of Islam. Andreescu and Radu reflect that “Jihad can be a struggle with yourself, when a Muslim learns to control his own desires and intentions”²⁰. It is this kind of understanding of Jihad that can assure a community of peaceful coexistence. It is, therefore, important to understand the religious struggle as an inner struggle, the *enemies* being within, not real or imagined from without²¹. In terms of membership, DAESH included Iraqis and Syrians who fought against their alienating governments, foreigners from Central Asia, North Africa, and the Middle East (driven by a desire to take part

¹⁷ Marc Sageman, *Understanding terror networks* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004), 13.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 10.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 4.

²⁰ Anghel Andreescu and Nicolae, Radu, *Terrorist organizations. Conceptualizing terror vs. European security* (București: Editura MAI, 2007), 51.

²¹ For fanatics, it is difficult to understand that the number of believers has reached a plateau, and the eventual growth of the Muslim population is achieved by multiplying the practitioners. Although converting from other religions can bring new members, it does so in a limited degree, as such, this segment interprets Jihad as an act of territorial conquest, doubled by the forced imposition of their interpretation of Islam.

in Jihad), Muslim and non-Muslim Westerners (searching revenge on a society in which they feel excluded).

III. Reviewing the Links between Al Qaida and DAESH

Terrorist groups, be they Al Qaeda or DAESH use Jihad as a form of reforming Islamic society, so in fact, the enemy is not just Western society²², but the fact that Muslim societies also evolved and modernized over time, which is why the sources for advancement need to be eliminated. Initially, DAESH did not value any form of control over those wishing to fight in Iraq, Syria, or anywhere in the world, as the group's main goal was about obtaining a global status; making it easy to join it (simple affiliation statement, usually also offered recognition) aimed to leave the impression of ubiquity, increasing the level of fear felt by the authorities, but also by the civilian population.

We believe that this approach allowed the group to increase its numbers without taking effective steps for personnel recruitment, without allocating resources, and allowed those interested to adhere to the idea of the Caliphate to join. In order to become an effective member, a recruit had to carry out a terrorist attack or travel to Syria and Iraq and join the fight on the ground. This decentralized growth contributed significantly to the members' morale. The leadership did not feel threatened because it was in control of the Caliphate's center and any member, whether or not they had direct contact with DAESH, listened to the Caliph's requests/orders. Compared to other extremist/terrorist groups, dependent on control, DAESH understood that it did not need to dictate the activity of declared members step by step, but to give them tasks that once completed, promote the interests of the group, even when it did not use resources and was not directly involved in the preparation of attacks or other such actions. This has amplified the group's unpredictability and hampered the work of force structures in preventing attacks, making it more effective in promoting terror.

To properly understand the current Jihad, it is noteworthy to remember a 1998 event that marked a global shift in the way Islamic Jihad developed after Al Qaeda leader, bin Laden declared that the killing of Americans and their allies, military and civilian, is a duty of every Muslim and must be done wherever

²² Ibid., 24.

possible²³. Sageman believes that where fundamentalist radicalization is concerned, “Muslims engage in Jihad because they share a set of norms, values, and worldviews. The creation and figment of these social identities are accomplished through a process of socialization that takes place in mosques, under the guidance of a Salafist imam, who preaches the benefits of global Jihad”²⁴. A number of people are likely to be corrupted and will eventually respond to radical demands from such extremist Salafist imams, but most of the time, experience has shown that no such process takes place (as evidenced by recent analyzes on the terrorists who carried out the attacks). If the individuals who join the Jihad do not suffer from some mental disability, then any action they will take is a voluntary, accepted, thought out, determined act, based on free will.

The clique, family, and friendship relations have stronger roots than when compared to the religious influence taken in isolation, which is why when a militant no longer identifies with a religious ideal, he will continue to take part in the religious war because of the connections that bind him to the idea²⁵. This assessment also applies to the case of DAESH, where fighters were allowed to remain in their home groups because they fought harder to defend their friend, meaning that such close bonds prevailed over group membership. Militants considered themselves special because they felt that they had “freed themselves from self-interest”²⁶, but in fact, they were captive to their own desires about the afterlife as a result of the fight against “unfaithful”, regardless of whether they were killed in action or died by way of suicide. All the actions taken were aimed at ensuring a comfortable life after death, and the essence guiding their motivations was in fact rooted in a selfish endeavor.

As Sageman observes, Bin Laden sought to promote a decentralized Jihad and “developed a system of small, robust and flexible networks”²⁷, the aim being to ensure autonomy, the ability to evolve on the “chimera” system. It is important to note that Bin Laden carefully chose those who became members of an Al Qaeda cell. This *modus operandi* was perfected by DAESH precisely because the purpose was to promote an idea, and, as such, the elimination of a

²³ On Osama Bin Laden's 1998 Fatwa, see Bernard Lewis, “License to Kill: Usama bin Ladin's Declaration of Jihad”, *Foreign Affairs*, November/December 1998, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/saudi-arabia/1998-11-01/license-kill-usama-bin-ladins-declaration-jihad>, accessed February 15, 2022.

²⁴ Sageman, *Understanding terror networks*, 143.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 153.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 155.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 172.

leader should not mean the disappearance of the entire entity, but the continuation of its actions by other operatives. Such group/cell autonomy and flexibility created major difficulties for government structures to counteract the actions of the Islamic State. The removal of Abu Bakr Al Baghdadi and of Abu Ibrahim Al-Hashimi Al-Qurashi²⁸ (on February 03, 2022) can have a good media impact but do not diminish the operational capacity of the group, in fact, these deaths offer their supporters a martyr, someone to be glorified.

Pasar Sherko points to DAESH's specific approach to changing and adapting its ideology according to the moment:

“In characterizing these aspects of the Islamic State’s operational ideology, it is particularly informative to examine statements made by IS leaders themselves. The rhetoric of IS leaders and spokesmen suggests that the Islamic State projects a unique self-image, battlefield perception, and set of criteria for success that differentiate it from similar organizations. Current academic literature on the Islamic State does not adequately address this unique perspective, and it consequently misses a substantial chunk of the organization’s thought structure. [...] In this sense, looking forward, it will be necessary to address and understand the Islamic State’s ideological practices in order to effectively combat any future resurgence.”²⁹.

I also agree with the notion that DAESH had a flexible, fluid ideology, adapted to the moment, constantly reviewed to control the narrative so that it often came up with statements that allowed a failure to be perceived by supporters as a success (even when the losses, involved loss of territory). However, the DAESH leaders did not seek to convince the public, but their own fighters and supporters. This theory demonstrates the political nature of DAESH's ideology where populist speeches were made with the determined purpose of achieving specific goal-oriented ends. In the same vein, Hassan believes that “the Islamic State’s ideology is multifaceted and cannot be traced to one individual, movement, or period”³⁰. He adds that:

²⁸ Barbara Starr et al., “ISIS leader killed in US-led Syria raid, Biden says”, *CNN*, February 3, 2022, <https://edition.cnn.com/2022/02/03/world/syria-us-special-forces-raid-intl-hnk/index.html>, accessed February 15, 2022.

²⁹ Pasar Sherko, “How Islamic State Ideology Contributes to Its Resilience”, *Washington Institute*, July 1, 2021, <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/how-islamic-state-ideology-contributes-its-resilience>, accessed February 15, 2022.

³⁰ Hassan Hassan, “The Sectarianism of the Islamic State. Ideological Roots and Political Context”, in *Beyond Sunni and Shia: The Roots of Sectarianism in a Changing Middle East Get access Arrow*, ed. Frederic Wehrey (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), 40.

“The Islamic State presents itself as the representative of authentic Islam as practiced by the early generations of Muslims – Salafism – and it draws on an especially strict brand of Salafism in particular, Wahhabism. The group is adept at cultivating and exploiting preexisting sectarian fissures in the Middle East. The Islamic State taps into communal hatred and religious concepts to recruit and justify its acts, or to foster sympathy and neutralize forces that actively reject it”³¹.

According to Hassan, DAESH uses the argument of the first three generations to claim that it respects an incipient Islam, the purpose of the group being to create division and invent a legitimacy born out of a data void, thus justifying any association of their actions with the way “things were in the days of the prophet”, without being able to present evidence of how things were actually done at that time. This represents a rather safe and uncomplicated way to manipulate, given that the conveyed message cannot be verified. DAESH capitalized on the cleavages in the Middle East but did not amplify them more than they already were – it only channeled them in the direction that maximized the group’s benefits by attracting financial support and activists to fight against the Shiite community.

Katarzyna Jasko et al. argue that “ISIS represents a special case of a radical group born of the conjunction between psychological needs, an ideological narrative, and a networking process”³². According to them:

“Operationally, the ISIS bureaucracy worked in accordance with two intertwined principles: (1) legislative tightness, reinforced by (2) a system of severe punishments that instilled a deep-seated fear in the population under ISIS control, thus forcing compliance with the rules.”³³

This assessment confirms that the purpose of DAESH was to lead and control territories and their inhabitants, and to achieve this goal it took authoritarian measures, applied terror, and borrowed techniques directly from the playbook of former Iraqi Mukhabarat. Where Syria was concerned, it was considered a moderate country with liberal tendencies. At the same time, a percentage of the Syrian population held radical tendencies and the country was “the favorite territory of Hanbalism, the rite of Sunni Islam which is the most conservative

³¹ Ibid, 41.

³² Katarzyna Jasko et al., “ISIS: Its History, Ideology, and Psychology”, in *Handbook of Contemporary Islam and Muslim Lives*, ed. Ronald Lukens-Bull and Mark Woodward (Cham: Springer, 2018), 1090.

³³ Ibid., 1101.

and which has strongly influenced the emergence of Wahhabism”³⁴. On this background, DAESH managed to recruit militants and receive support from locals who sympathized with the implementation of *Sharia*. Such cultural aspects, explain how one of the more secular Middle Eastern become a source of radical Islamic militants.

III.1. Cooperation between DAESH and the Legacy of the Saddamist Period

DAESH's success was largely based on one of the groups that supported the founding of the entity – Iraqi army personnel, made redundant in 2003, after the removal of Saddam Hussein. Although many military personnel were former Ba'athists, not all former military members identified with the Iraqi Ba'ath Party. Ba'athists and former Iraqi officers, ousted from government structures by the international coalition in 2003, have been the main component of the force that has waged a civil war since 2004, and, as Anderson points out, “the same excluded Sunni groups will join DAESH 10 years later”³⁵. Ba'athism was based on the following features: anti-imperialism, Arab nationalism, Arab socialism, pan-Arabism, republicanism, anti-Zionism, progressivism, and secularism. With the exception of anti-Zionism, the rest of the features of Ba'athism were not aligned (and were possibly even in contradiction) with the basic concepts of the DAESH ideology – which was derived from the *Sharia*. DAESH was not made up exclusively of ideologically affiliated people, nor of ardent supporters of Islam. However, religious elements cooperated with former members of Iraqi structures before 2003 because they benefited from military training, knowledge of the terrain, mass control skills, and had the capacity to instill fear, which could be adapted under the disguise of religious ideology. This shows that DAESH was not an exclusively religious group.

DAESH relied on what Luizard referred to as “a militant and universalist discourse addressing a global community”³⁶, with the goal of overcoming territorial limitations. It is worth mentioning that DAESH capitalized on existing religious and ethnic divisions, between Sunnis and Shiites, as well as between Iraqis and Iranians. This approach attracted militants and radicals, willing to sacrifice, if not for a religious ideal, then for the country or their ethnic identity.

³⁴ Simon Mabon and Stephen Royle, *The origins of ISIS* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2017), 106.

³⁵ Anderson, *Fractured Lands*, 49.

³⁶ Pierre-Jean Luizard, *Capcana DAESH – Statul Islamic sau întoarceva istoriei / Le piège de Daech. L'Etat islamique ou le retour de L'Histoire* (Iași: Polirom, 2016), 35.

Usually, militants become trapped in a social system “without anchors in society and easily fall into a global war between good and evil”³⁷. This aspect is relevant because it creates a *trap effect* – after a person joins a side, it becomes difficult for them to give up, even if later, they become disillusioned, as they do not want to believe they were wrong, that their actions were in fact crimes, and they do not fight to defend an ideal. At the same time, the individual is so immersed in terrorist activities that he is aware that any other authority will hold him accountable, and he would most likely lose his freedom or even his life. After the Iraqi government acted violently against Sunni protesters in 2013 and 2014, Luizard describes how “the emergence of DAESH and the goal of creating a Sunni country”³⁸ was a response to the prayers of the locals. This, then, coagulated around the DAESH communities in Sunni areas, which offered no resistance when the group eliminated or banished Iraqi military forces, thinking that “it could not get any worse”.

To understand DAESH’s ideological basis, it is necessary to review Abu Bakr Al Baghdadi’s development, who joined al-Zarqawi’s group, Tawhid al-Jihad, in 2003, charged with bringing foreign fighters to Iraq. He became the group’s leader in 2010, building on the remnants of Al Qaeda in Iraq, which he renamed as the Islamic State of Iraq³⁹, amid the lack of popularity of the group led by Osama bin Laden. In 2011, he sent fighters to Syria to train, obtain resources, practice combat tactics, and convey various messages: enemies are “the oligarchic and corrupt elites who ruled Syria and Iraq, the Shiites”⁴⁰. Unlike other jihadist leaders, Al Baghdadi had Islamic studies, which gave him authority in interpreting the Qur’an and the *hadith*. He consistently displayed a modest attitude, aiming to reflect that he considered himself equal to his followers – an extremely important aspect in Iraq and Syria, where the dignity of Sunni communities was severely affected by the conflict with the Shiite elements.

It is important to consider that the development of DAESH took place in a favorable regional and international context, characterized by a lack of leadership and a major division of values. Cockburn points out that:

“the great wealth of the Gulf oil states – Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, Qatar, Kuwait – has turned into political power. [...] The wealth of the Saudis has increased the influence of this intolerant and regressive strain, which

³⁷ Sageman, *Understanding terror networks*, 151.

³⁸ Luizard, *Capcana DAESH*, 87.

³⁹ Loretta Napoleoni, *ISIS – The Terror Nation* (București: Corint, 2015), 35.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 36.

denounces other Islamic sects, such as Shiism, as heretical and considers women forever submissive to men”⁴¹.

In Cockburn’s view, the wealth that has come into the possession of the governments, but also of various business people from these states, though not limited only to them, has created a major funding base for radical segments that support DAESH or similar entities.

IV. Positions of Relevant Religious Authorities Regarding DAESH

DAESH’s attempts to link Islam to its actions have been rejected by the Islamic religious authorities. Saudi Arabia’s Grand Mufti Sheikh Abdul Aziz Al Sheikh stated, in 2014 and 2015, that DAESH and Al Qaeda are “Islam’s number one enemy”⁴², stressing that extremism, militancy, and terrorism are spreading on earth and destroying humanity, unrelated to Islam. The Association of Muslim Scholars in Iraq assessed in 2014 that the actions of DAESH on Christians in Mosul are non-Islamic, contrary to the recommendations of the Prophet Mohammed, regarding the relationship with the “People of the Book” (Christians, Jews)⁴³. Moreover, a summary of over 120 academics and scholars in Islam identified over twenty violations of Islam by DAESH: issuing fatwa (Islamic rules) without following the accepted procedure; the discretionary and selective use of the Qur’an and *hadith*, as well as taking information out of context to explain and motivate the actions of the terrorist group; issuing rules without the correct use of the Arabic language; Sharia oversimplification and ignorance of Islamic science; ignoring the realities of the present; killing the innocent; killing of messengers, emissaries, ambassadors and diplomats, journalists and volunteers; Jihad as defensive, well-motivated war according to Islamic precepts; the Yazidi community is not pagan, but “People of the Book”; the reintroduction of slavery; prohibition of children’s rights; the

⁴¹ Patrick Cockburn, *Chaos & Caliphate: Jihadis and the West in the Struggle for the Middle East / Epoca Jihadului – Statul Islamic și marele război pentru Orientul Mijlociu* (Iași: Polirom, 2019), 7.

⁴² Wilson Center, “Muslims Against ISIS Part 1: Clerics & Scholars”, September 24, 2014, <https://www.wilsoncenter.org/article/muslims-against-isis-part-1-clerics-scholars>, accessed February 20, 2022.

⁴³ Ibid.

application of punishments without following the legal procedure; torture of people; declaring the caliphate without the consent of all Muslims⁴⁴.

In other words, before attacking the values of the West, DAESH challenged the entire Islamic establishment, and, as such, the creation of the Caliphate and the Caliph would have annulled the current religious authorities, including those mentioned above, who declared themselves against the group. After analysing the above statements, we conclude that DAESH could not find justification for violent actions based on Islam, instead they warped Islamic content to provide justification for killings, rapes, and other crimes against humanity.

IV.1. Roots and Objectives

Terrorist groups appear and spread in a territory based on a favorable situation. For Al Qaeda, it was the fight against the Soviets in Afghanistan, for DAESH, it was the conflict in Syria and Iraq. In both cases, the groups developed under the breakdown of the rule of law was, when the central and local authorities did not exercise their authority, and/or a conflict was ongoing. DAESH and other radical Islamic groups have used ideas that Western society must be destroyed because it promotes homosexuality, drugs, alcohol, adultery, inappropriate clothing, and access to immoral things. A lack of originality can be noticed, each ideology contradicted the previous one and, often, it was formed in contrast to the concepts of ideology active at that time.

Bourrie considers that “the organisation’s political roots are deeply stuck in the region’s history, based on one hand, the Wahhabi interpretation of Islam and, on the other hand, the ethnic policies of the region”⁴⁵. The Wahhabi interpretation refers to the return of the Islamic religion to its original purity and the unification of all Arabs into one state. Strictly starting from this branch of Islam, DAESH overcame Wahhabism because it was not limited to the Arab population and accepted any ethnicity, anyone could join the group if they respected the new ideology of the group.

Napoleoni reflects on the fact that:

“the main goal of the Islamic State is to become for Sunni Muslims what Israel is to the Jews: a state founded on ancient territory, but claimed today, a strong religious state to protect them wherever they may be. As shocking and repulsive as this comparison may be, it nevertheless represents the strong message sent to young Muslims without rights living in the political chaos created by disruptive

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ Bourrie, *The Killing Game*, 92-93.

factors such as excessive corruption, inequality, and injustice in modern Muslim states, ruthless dictatorship of Bashar al-Assad in Syria, the refusal of the government led by Nouri-al Maliki to integrate Sunnis into the structure of Iraqi political life, ending their persecution by the political machinery in Baghdad, the failure of the socio-economic infrastructure destroyed during the war and the high unemployment rate⁴⁶.

I agree with the author that DAESH tried to capitalize on these messages to attract young people to fight for a caliphate, but I disagree with the assessment that because these young people were deprived of their rights, they were motivated to join DAESH. After all, DAESH never promised freedom of expression or that it would provide jobs in an environment favorable to personal development, instead it pledged that it would implement *Sharia* and revive societal norms dating from the time when the Prophet lived. According to Napoleoni, young Muslims joined DAESH for the following reasons⁴⁷:

- to avenge their Muslim comrades for the humiliation they endured in the Middle East;
- to build a new political order in the Middle East, a modern state with no racism or sectarian tensions;
- to constitute the caliphate as an integral and incorruptible nation, with a deep sense of brotherhood;
- to experience the adventure of going to military camps.

In addition to the reasons identified above, mainly political in nature, I believe that the young militants joined DAESH because it had become the strongest active group in Iraq and Syria, and it could provide them the conditions for a different experience, while also giving off the impression that it will not be defeated (the appearance of invincibility entails high levels of attraction), and that the group will exist in the territory occupied for a long time.

The use of incentives was one of the most important tools used by the Islamic State to succeed and get its fighters fully involved in accomplishing their goals and amplifying its ideology. Maher points out that “As an idea, Jihad is iridescent and opaque”⁴⁸. This ambiguity allows interested entities to transform the message and build parallel worlds, with roots presumed in Islam, but which no longer follow the established path for the development of society. Instead,

⁴⁶ Napoleoni, *ISIS – The Terror Nation*, 28-29.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 84-85.

⁴⁸ Shiraz Maher, *Salafi – Jihadism: the history of an idea* (London: Hurst&Company, 2016), 32.

they capitalize on the regional and/or local context in order to dominate, eliminate inconvenient groups – all done in the name of Jihad, which can be interpreted in almost any way.

Within DAESH, foreign and local fighters were addicted to psychotropic substances, being susceptible to manipulation, many militants were using drugs before committing suicide attacks, which reflects that, at least, some decisions to carry out terrorist attacks were not made while being of sound mind⁴⁹. Additionally, in locations used by DAESH fighters, Kurdish and Iraqi forces found alcohol which although supposedly banned, it was not eradicated. I have cited these examples in order to underline that the Jihad was not an objective for all DAESH fighters but was rather exploited by the terrorist group to emphasise the piety of its adepts and to attract new members, who believed in piety and wanted to live in a place that strictly adhered to Islamic precepts.

I had the opportunity to talk⁵⁰ to Sunni Arab Iraqi from the Iraqi Army, nationalists and religious alike, who declared themselves against DAESH, although many former Sunni Iraqi soldiers were still active within the terrorist group. What they understand (and former and actual IS leaders do not) is that the conditions of the time when caliphs were gaining territory for Islam do not exist anymore and could hardly be recreated. Currently, the international community could be mobilized much faster than DAESH's expansion capacity, as seen by the fact that when it attacked the Kurds in Syria and Iraq, the move put an end to its expansion. Regarding the reasons that led to the depreciation of DAESH's capabilities, I would put forth the following arguments:

- DAESH did not limit itself to a defined territory in the Sunni Arab territories of Iraq and Syria; meanwhile, the expansionist statements created panic among the regional partners of many militarily strong states such as the USA and the combined force of NATO, Russia, Iran, the Gulf countries;
- the attack on the Kurdistan Region of Iraq and Rojava (Syrian Kurdish-controlled territory inside Syria) led, in turn, to their mobilization against DAESH;

⁴⁹ CBS News, “\$1.4M ISIS cache of “jihadist's drug” seized, U.S. says”, June 18, 2018, <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/jihadists-drug-captagon-seized-isis-syria-us-military-amphetamine-haul/>, accessed March 1, 2022.

⁵⁰ Data obtained as a result of professional activity as a diplomat in Iraq, between 2013-2016.

- currently, the oppressed are migrating, many of those interested in political change in the Middle East, had already abandoned the afflicted countries in search of peace and stability;
- the terrorist attacks in the West have had a limited impact, leading Western security services and armies to commit significant resources to eliminate DAESH⁵¹;
- similarly, attacks on Shiites and other ethnic and religious minorities have led to a major mobilization of Iran and Western states.

V. Conclusions

In the present paper, I set out to assess DAESH's ideology, which I consider to be an essential factor that supported and facilitated the group's actions to recruit militants, obtain funding, and control occupied territories. The results show that DAESH did not promote, nor apply Islam, but was an extremist-radical entity that used the Islamic ideas and concepts in the Qur'an to recruit militants, attract funds, subdue believers, and eliminate rivals under accusations of apostasy. By analysing the literature and identifying the myths promoted by the terrorist group, I could elaborate on ideas and bring counter-arguments to claims that DAESH represented a veritable expression of Islam.

On this note, Syed and Subhani's analysis is relevant since it touches on the idea that "Islam's political principles are highly congruent with constitutional democracy, with agreement on consultation, consensus and the protection of individual rights, the basic ingredients of pluralism and constitutionalism"⁵². DAESH used the name of Islam to create a parallel ideology that fought the very democracies from which a significant number of recruits came. The above-mentioned conclusion deconstructs this position, which aimed exclusively at creating a hermetic ideological environment within which the followers would follow strict rules and orders; would act as mere executioners; would be absolved from the responsibility of decision-making; would be pawns who

⁵¹ Uri Friedman, "\$300,000 an Hour: The Cost of Fighting ISIS", *The Atlantic*, November 12, 2014, <https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2014/11/300000-an-hour-the-cost-of-fighting-isis/382649/>, accessed March 1, 2022.

⁵² Ahmed Muzakkir Syed and Zulqernain Haider Subhani, "Pluralism Constitutionalism and Islamic Political Thought", India International Islamic Academic Conference, New Delhi, 2016, 22, https://www.researchgate.net/publication/315665588_Pluralism_Constitutionalism_and_Islamic_Political_Thought, accessed March 1, 2022.

would blindly obey everything demanded from them by the Calif. This observation is important in combating the ideas promoted by terrorist groups that claim that the fusion of democracy and Islam is not possible, which, in turn, enabled them to seek through forceful means the removal of apostate leaders from Muslim countries.

The group's affirmations according to which it reclaims legitimacy in Islam are proven false, an outright manipulation that seeks to ensure that DAESH has the largest recruitment pool possible within the Sunni Muslim community. For this purpose, it capitalized on a populist rhetoric, created opinion leaders, and maximized ideas such as *we are you, you are us* in order to display openness and humility. From a constructivist point of view, despite promoting a form of chaos, the terrorist group aimed to create order in the image of the ideas formulated by their leaders. It is important to understand that change cannot take place constantly, change is temporary and provides changes to present conditions that no longer meet the needs of the group / society.

But, after the choice to change occurs, the process of change takes place, which might vary in duration, depending on the complexity of the change, after which comes the stabilization of the new norms and the stability of the new form of organization. The change promised in order to end the state of anarchy is not as extensive as a member of the community would expect, because stratification occurs, each individual who appears will assume a role and a certain organization, which to a significant extent will not be different from the previous one.

Taking into consideration military realism, after forming through war as an entity on a controlled territory / pseudo-state / ghost-state, in fact, DAESH continued in the same logic of war, being constantly on the offensive to conquer new territories, or on the defensive to defend controlled territories. This type of organization is an exhausting one, although it is as current today as in 1979, when Waltz wrote the book *Theory of International Politics*.

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