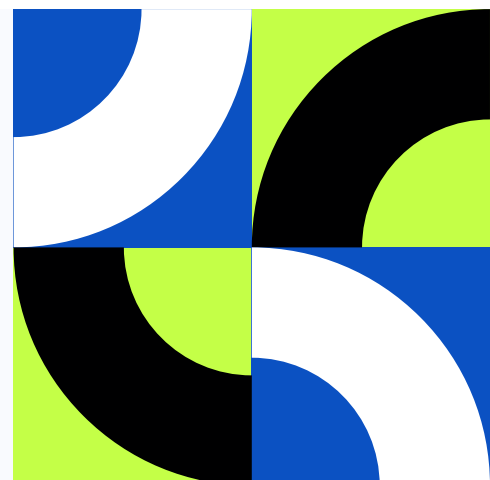


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15 pages / 4000 words

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Title	To what extent have methods of psychological warfare employed by The Muslim Brotherhood and ISIS in the Middle East directly influenced national security?
Subject	World Studies (Political Science)



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Table of Contents

Introduction.....	3
The Allure of ISIS in the Levantine Countries.....	4
A. Contextual background	4
B. ISIS's Psychological Warfare methods	5
C. Promises that appeal to basic needs	6
D. Real-world impact on the Levantine population	7
Conclusion	8
References	10

Introduction

Background on terrorism and Psychological Warfare: The Middle East is an area rich in history and culture. Still, the later part of the twentieth century and the first decade of the twenty-first century have seen it become associated with turmoil, violence, and terrorism. The area has seen civil wars and sectarian conflicts as a direct result of geopolitical maneuvers and power struggles. Many radical organizations have sprung up over the last few decades to bridge the consequent ideological and political chasms and voids. The 1979 Iranian Revolution and the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan and Iraq in 2003 offered a breeding environment for extreme ideology. Revolutionary organizations took advantage of the instability to pursue their agendas by appealing to people's latent social and political anger. Psychological warfare has a dual function in the context of contemporary terrorist attacks (Lutz & Lutz, 2011). Its principal part is to instill terror in its victims, yet it also has the potential to be used as a powerful recruiting tool.

The Muslim Brotherhood and ISIS: Founded in 1928 in Egypt, the Muslim Brotherhood is a religious and social organization with roots in Islamic study and charity. Over time, opinions shifted, with some members advocating for peaceful political participation and others turning to violence. However, ISIS sprang from the ashes of Al Qaeda in Iraq. It grew at an unparalleled pace in 2014, capturing substantial portions of territory in both Syria and Iraq. Under the leadership of Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, ISIS has proclaimed a global caliphate. Although political Islam has served as both parties' starting point, their current strategies couldn't be more unlike. Even though it was persecuted in nations like Egypt, the Muslim Brotherhood often tried to cooperate with established political structures (Blanga, 2017). But to get its enemies to submit, ISIS used cruelty, such as beheadings and other psychological warfare techniques.

Link to National Security Concerns: The tactics used by extremist organizations, particularly those with psychological foundations, provide a variety of risks to national security. First, the organization makes it more difficult to combat terrorism because it is more difficult to block the transmission of ideas than to stop military forces from advancing. Even in remote areas, their speech can spread and radicalize specific individuals. The organization indirectly influences

election outcomes, public sentiment, and policy decisions by fostering a climate of fear and uncertainty, often resulting in unpopular policies and social divisions.

The Allure of ISIS in the Levantine Countries

A. Contextual background

Geographically, historically, and religiously, the Levant region Syria, Lebanon, Jordan, Israel, and Palestine is essential. Surrounded by vast deserts, strong empires, and the Mediterranean Sea, this historic crossroads of cultures, faiths, and civilizations is historically significant.

- Life in the Levant today is a complicated web of subtleties. Some nations, like Israel, have seen relative peace and success economically, while other nations, like Syria and Lebanon, have struggled with political unrest, economic hardships, and sectarian violence. Given the competition for dominance among regional countries like Saudi Arabia, Iran, and Turkey, the geopolitical dynamic only complicates things. Many different peoples and civilizations live in the Levantine region, and each one brings its own set of issues, goals, and anxieties (Al-Anani, 2015). Because of its complexity and unpredictable nature, the current political environment is perfect for spreading radical ideas.
- The Levant has played an essential role in history as a cultural incubator and an imperial junction. The events of the twentieth century, including the fall of the Ottoman Empire, the founding of Israel, and the drawing of artificial boundaries by the Sykes-Picot agreement, are the foundation upon which the Israeli-Arab conflict rests (Bickerton & Klausner, 2018). The 2003 U.S. invasion of Iraq prepared the path for Al Qaeda in Iraq to flourish and eventually morph into ISIS, which has led to the present turmoil in the region. The conflict in Syria escalated rapidly after 2011. The Arab Spring uprisings against Bashar al-Assad's rule quickly escalated into a civil war that drew regional and international troops. This multifaceted conflict, which involved rebels, Islamists, Kurds, government soldiers, foreign militias, and others, led to anarchy, displacement, and a humanitarian crisis. Lebanon, a nation with a delicate sectarian balance, is also reeling

from the political stalemate, economic collapse, and spillover effects of the Syrian crisis (Kayani, Ahmed & Shoaib, 2015). The conflict between Israel and the Palestinian territories, especially Gaza, continues with periodic flare-ups and a continuous blockade with no end (Kfir, 2015). Due to the area's troubled past and the widespread economic and political disenfranchisement that has afflicted the region in recent years; certain members of the Levantine population were susceptible to ISIS's appeal.

B. ISIS's Psychological Warfare methods

ISIS has done an excellent job of using the internet to spread its ideas because most information is now disseminated online. Unlike previous terrorist groups, ISIS is run more like a media corporation.

- ISIS has a highly active media department that produces everything from glossy propaganda videos showcasing the group's military prowess to digital journals and nasheeds (Islamic songs). People worldwide obtain this information since cell phones and the internet are common (Hamiti, 2016). ISIS propaganda, recruitment videos, and horrifying execution scenes were abundant on YouTube, Telegram, and Twitter. ISIS uses more than just propaganda in its campaigns. The organization is master at reaching out to its target audience, mainly loners and the despairing.
- The organization claimed to rescue people from repressive governments or sectarian militias by posing as liberators of war-torn areas. Giving them a feeling of purpose and belonging, the organization assisted many Muslim kids in the West struggling with their identity. A narrative of "us against them" gained support due to the advent of ISIS, which deepened social divides and frustrations (Rai, 2018). The organization also used the fear reaction to good effect. In the captured area, a relentless barrage of graphic visuals quelled opposition and compelled obedience.
- The theological justifications ISIS made for its existence were crucial to its success. However, their interpretation of Islam was extreme and restricted. ISIS sought to portray texts taken out of context to give the impression that God approved their activities. This

strategy was particularly effective with those with a cursory grasp of Islam (Beccaro, 2018). For example, "Jihad" is seen as an aggressive conflict with "infidels" rather than an inward quest for improvement. The church emphasized the celestial benefits that martyrs would receive to draw in new members. Similar claims were made, arguing that joining ISIS was a religious responsibility rather than just a way to get notoriety. Legitimacy was imparted to their cause and actions via the deliberate use and exploitation of literature for malicious ends.

C. Promises that appeal to basic needs

Necessities were promised and, in some instances, provided to local inhabitants in ISIS-controlled areas.

- Basic needs like food, water, and energy are often scarce in areas devastated by conflict. ISIS took advantage of this and seemed to be a force for good by providing food and other resources to the general populace. Despite how little or symbolic these acts have been, their significance cannot be emphasized (Ellis et al., 2020). The organization presented itself as a compassionate group by highlighting its "charitable" activities compared to the sometimes dishonest and ineffective local government structures.
- The security guarantee is invaluable in this unpredictable world. Despite the extensive persecution of dissidents and others considered non-compliant by ISIS, some places managed to maintain some semblance of order. Checkpoints, police patrols, and a strict, harsh legal system are increasingly commonplace (Poushter & Manevich, 2017). This seemed like a step in the right direction for some locals tired of the anarchy, robbery, and needless bloodshed. ISIS established and funded these military and police organizations to justify its control despite the crimes perpetrated.
- Many people found resonance in recreating a Caliphate because of historical and theological connections. ISIS considers itself to be at the forefront of a broader Islamic renaissance rather than just an insurgent organization. The 2014 proclamation of a Caliphate was primarily symbolic and meant to rekindle romantic ideas about the heyday

of Islam. The organization said that the Caliphate would serve as a demonstration of Islamic law and governance. It was popular among those dissatisfied with modern Middle Eastern governments as a more traditional and equitable interpretation of Islamic law and governance (Bloom & Daymon, 2018). People were fascinated by the concept of an ideal Islamic state, particularly those unfamiliar with Islamic history or governance. Because its tactics appealed to both the general public and its scholarship, ISIS was able to win over a large number of adherents.

D. Real-world impact on the Levantine population

The ripple effects of ISIS's threats and propaganda across the Levant were significant. Its impacts pervaded all societal echelons and impacted people's tastes well beyond the mere conquest of additional land.

- ISIS has attracted supporters from many walks of life with its appealing ideology. ISIS effectively used psychological methods to ensure that many people heard and understood their message. For ideologically committed people, the restoration of the Caliphate was a return to a paradise on earth (Starr, 2011). Supporting or joining ISIS felt like the most viable alternative for many people, particularly in crisis zones. In areas where chaos prevailed, the promise of regular meals, security, and restoring some semblance of order were attractive. But for others, particularly young individuals from disadvantaged backgrounds, ISIS allowed them to channel their anger and gain status and power. The group's goal of spreading their message through social media was accomplished. The internet's capacity to idealize their cause helped them attract backers worldwide, not only in the Levant and the Western Hemisphere (Lieberman, 2017).
- While most people in the Levant did not convert to Islam or join ISIS, many were inspired by the group's actions and became supporters. Since the Sunni-majority regions of Iraq had long felt ignored by the Shiite-led government, the organization was especially vulnerable to ISIS's allure. Some people have been on ISIS's side initially, but many likely changed their minds after seeing the brutality of the group's reign (Smith, Brook-Holland & Page, 2014). Adopting harsh policies, enduring economic failures, and

being militarily assaulted from outside caused the organization to lose a lot of regional support.

Conclusion

ISIS's quick rise to dominance and eventual spread across the Levant signifies a significant change in extremist strategies. In other instances, psychological warfare outperformed more conventional military tactics to the point of outright replacement. These strategies are powerful because the organization can influence many people, cross national boundaries, and gain a global following. ISIS has shown that psychological warfare is effective via media, propaganda, and promises in addition to brute force. The attraction of these strategies lies in their ability to win wars without resorting to deadly force. ISIS's use of psychological warfare has had far-reaching consequences. The organization has won more territory, but its mindset continued to be dangerous long after. Anyone can get radicalized and carry out attacks anywhere in the world; it's not limited to those who have been to the Levant. As radical ideology-driven "lone wolf" attacks increase frequency, the decentralization of terrorism presents obstacles for the current security framework. Extremist views rapidly solidify in the echo chambers created by internet platforms, making deradicalization difficult.

The threats posed by psychological warfare need a combination of countermeasures. First, governments all around the globe must coordinate their efforts to keep an eye on and control the online sphere. Sites that provide extremist content must be located and taken down without delay. Funding outreach and education to disseminate narratives contradicting radical views is also essential for countries to invest in. Economic disparity and political grievances are two elements that make individuals susceptible to radicalization and must be investigated. Several countries have launched deradicalization projects to reintegrate citizens who have been radicalized. These initiatives focus on counseling, education, and community assistance to debunk extremist myths and provide realistic alternatives. Prioritizing international solidarity and collaboration is essential. To effectively combat extremist ideology, governments worldwide must share intelligence, best practices, and resources. The challenges posed by psychological

warfare are substantial but manageable with the right amount of planning, preparation, and commitment.

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