

Through exploring the power of ISIS to attract young men to its cause, **John Bell** sees a starting point for more effective responses to Middle East unrest.

# How meaning drives events in the Middle East

**I** AM from the Middle East, but, when I lived there as a child, it was a very different region from that of today. It had its troubles, wars, oppressive traditions, but, somehow, the beauty of nature and the joys of family made up for many of its problems. It was a relatively normal place in the 1960s, but the seeds for where we have ended up were already planted. My parents saw that, and left the region for the greener pastures of Canada.



Today's Middle East is a zone of killing, war, chaos, and the slow disintegration of societies. Its ailments have spread to Yemen, Iraq, Libya, Syria and its spillover has hit Europe through the arrival of refugees. Older conflicts also persist: Israel–Palestine, the plight of the Kurds, and trouble is brewing in Egypt and Turkey. The list is long.

Because of the media, and its pervasive shadow over our lives (or, more accurately, over our minds), when we think of the Middle East today, we think of ISIS, also variously known as the Islamic State or Caliphate, ISIL or DAESH, its acronym in Arabic that sadly captures the semitic imagination because it sounds like an uncomplimentary word in that language.

ISIS looms large for us because of its attacks on our urban centres, and its horrific propaganda of maiming, burning and raping people in the name of a holy mission. There is much else going on in the region, and ISIS is currently being corralled and destroyed by a variety of armed forces, with the result that global recruitment is down, few wanting to join a losing cause. By the time this article is published, ISIS may even be quite finished in Iraq.

But ISIS's notoriety helps illustrate particularly vividly how meaning drives events in the Middle East – a question that many career diplomats have never even thought of asking. Few in policy circles and diplomacy know how to deal with a problem such as ISIS in a preventive fashion. International relations, diplomacy and conflict resolution remain set in the ways of the 20th century, if not the 1800s.

There is a need for new ideas in diplomacy and, while there are certainly no silver bullets available, there may be solid foundations that we can build on, even if it will take time. ISIS is a lesson in how basic emotional motivations, and especially the need for meaning, can explain the

turmoil in the Middle East and soon possibly elsewhere. How in the world did a group with such devious purposes become a successful brand and an international franchise, at least until recently?

A few telling stories come into my mind. I was recently having a nice lunch with Spanish diplomats and mediators in Madrid when one of our number, who was posted in Sudan, told us the following tale: “I was just in Khartoum,” he said, “and I can tell you the case of a young Sudanese man who was well educated, came from a good family and had gone away to work as an engineer. He had made enough money to send back to his family and was even getting ready to get married – when he suddenly joined an extremist group.” He paused, shook his head, and murmured, “What would cause him to do that when many things were going well in his life?”

German journalist Juergen Todenhoefer, who managed to spend time with ISIS in Iraq and Syria, has described what he saw: “When we stayed at their recruitment house, there were 50 new fighters who came every day. And I just could not believe the glow in their eyes. They felt like they were coming to a promised land, like they were fighting for the right thing.

“These are not stupid people. One of the people we met had just finished his law degree. He had great job offers, but he turned them down to go and fight ... We met fighters from Europe and the United States. One of them was from New Jersey. Can you imagine a man from New Jersey travelling to fight for the Islamic State?”<sup>1</sup> The ISIS recruits he was with remarked that, in a thousand years, people will still be talking about those who built the caliphate. In the heady early days, some ISIS fighters imagined that the World Cup would be held in their newly conquered territory in Raqqa, Syria.

There is also the case, well known in America, of Abdirizak Mohamed Warsame, a young Somali-American from Minnesota. He was involved constructively with his local community, and his sister and mother actively fought against radicalisation. Yet he chose to join ISIS.<sup>2</sup>

## So many needs met

How can we explain these behaviour patterns? Anthropologist Scott Atran has done extensive studies on what fires up these young men (and

some women). He often begins his explanations by reminding people that, “Mr Hitler has discovered that human beings don’t only want peace and security and comfort and freedom from want. They want adventure, glory and self-sacrifice.” His research emphasises that the need for meaning is key. Most foreign volunteers are, in the main, youth in transitional stages in their lives, looking for *significance*. Most have had no traditional religious education, and are often ‘born again’ into a socially tight, ideologically narrow but world-spanning sense of religious mission.<sup>3</sup> What may be especially surprising, I think, is that many of these young people think they are having ‘the time of their lives’ – until the bombs fall on their heads, their best friend is dead, or they are trapped in a Boschian hell with megalomaniacs.

Many ‘experts’ look to economic causes to explain ISIS. Poverty and lack of economic opportunity are often touted as root causes. However, the man from Khartoum was an economic success, and many of the people Todenhoefer interviewed were lawyers and professionals. Atran’s research indicates that even though a lack of economic opportunity can be a factor, the pursuit of meaning may be more critical in making younger people seek out such crusades.

A look at the human givens definition of meaning may be useful: “Meaning comes from being stretched in what we do and how we think. Meaning makes suffering tolerable. It is through ‘stretching’ ourselves mentally or physically – by service to others, learning new skills or being connected to ideas or philosophies bigger than ourselves – that our lives feel purposeful and full of meaning.”<sup>4</sup>

It may be difficult to imagine, but ISIS does offer a chance to be stretched, to learn new skills, be connected to big ideas and live a purposeful life, even if it is all very askew and misdirected. When an unmet human need meets the promise of sweeping or exciting ideology, it can spell disaster. But the human givens paradigm can help explain much else, beyond meaning. Many other needs are being met through ISIS as well:

**Belonging:** As Scott Atran explains, “Plots never occur in mosques: you have to be quiet in a mosque. They occur in fast-food places, soccer fields, picnics and barbecues.”<sup>5</sup> Indeed, many people were radicalised only after being kicked out of the mosques for their extremist views – they go on to seek kinship and fellow feeling where they can find it.

**Status:** Local recruits especially gain a sense of status by gaining control over resources and people. They grow to be feared because of their power, and consequently become local big shots –

a massive form of status.

**Intimacy:** Tragically, in some cases, this need is being met by the perverse promise of sexual favours.

It stands to reason that recruits also gain a sense of *control* and *achievement* by being given clear responsibilities and challenges to meet in a well-organised movement, and by being rewarded materially and emotionally for their efforts; and that, until the recent military campaign against them, ISIS members also had a sense of emotional *security* through being part of a group of like-minded people who were all ready to fight for each other.

Indeed, in my conversation during lunch with the Spanish diplomats and mediators, the causes they put forward to explain extremists’ motives included social alienation, a sense of belonging (gained through membership of internet groups) and intimacy. Ironically, the man who

had instigated the conversation, by asking how the engineer from Khartoum could possibly have joined ISIS, simply shrugged at these answers and exclaimed, “It’s all very emotional. I just don’t understand it!” – a telling statement about the state of diplomacy.

Indeed, it *is* all very emotional and not only as regards the needs we have been discussing. In the Middle East, high emotion pervades the dealings of daily life. Whether triggered by a small family crisis or a large social or political problem, the resort to high emotion and drama is sure and rapid in the region. Many who are from emotionally stifled environments in the West find this attractive and their thirst is quenched by the excess of emotion. However, as an operating mode, it leads to many poor decisions in the Middle East.

In the meantime, ISIS followers are deriving emotional gains from the group, even if the goals are destructive and the benefits short-lived. As we know, it is not just having our needs met which is important; it is *how* we do so that also matters.

## The ‘God’ nominalisation

I remember some professional headhunters explaining to me once that I belonged to “the kind of people who work for mission-driven organisations”. Whoever worked for such groups was seeking meaning and purpose rather than just money and material remuneration. Whether this was true or not in my case, this term is a useful one for explaining not only ISIS but also many other political activities and organisations in the Middle East: Israeli settlers in the West Bank, Hizballah (the party of God), Al Qaeda, Hamas, and even the Palestine Liberation Organisation



Photo © istockphoto.com | jpa999

## REFERENCES

- 1 Pleitgen, F (2015). *Author’s journey inside ISIS: they’re “more dangerous than people realize”*. CNN International Edition. <http://edition.cnn.com/2014/12/22/world/middleeast/inside-isis-jurgen-todenhoefer>
- 2 Associated Press (2016). *Surrounded by positives, young Somali chose ISIS*. Al Arabiya English. <http://english.alarabiya.net/en/perspective/analysis/2016/04/10/Surrounded-by-positives-young-Somali-chose-ISIS.html>
- 3 Scott Atran on youth, violent extremism and promoting peace (2015). *Neuroanthropology* <http://blogs.plos.org/neuroanthropology/2015/04/25/scott-atran-on-youth-violent-extremism-and-promoting-peace>; Atran, S (2015). *The real power of ISIS*. *The Daily Beast*. <http://www.thedailybeast.com/articles/2015/10/25/the-real-power-of-isis.html>
- 4 Human Givens [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Human\\_givens](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Human_givens)
- 5 Rardon, S (2015). *Looking for the roots of terrorism*. *Nature*. <http://www.nature.com/news/looking-for-the-roots-of-terrorism-1.16732>
- 6 Armstrong, K (2014). *The myth of religious violence*. *The Guardian*. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/sep/25/sp-karen-armstrong-religious-violence-myth-secular>
- 7 Tyrrell, I (1993). *Exploring the CULT in culture*. *The Therapist*. <http://www.hgi.org.uk/resources/delve-our-extensive-library/society-and-culture/exploring-cult-culture>

(PLO), once upon a time. They are all mission-driven organisations, and, as a result, their followers are highly motivated to perform. In all cases, meaning is the jet fuel, the motivator of actions.

What is also intriguing is how many of these groups use or refer back to 'God'. In my view, this is an overpowering nominalisation that stretches back into the heritage of all the peoples in the region. The issue of religion's role is a contentious one. Karen Armstrong, a British author of books on comparative religion, has made the case that religious wars are fewer and often less violent than other kinds of conflict.<sup>6</sup> Yet, when religious ideas are combined with modern technology and ideology, or brainwashing, perfect organisations of destruction can be developed.

As the work on cults of American psychiatrist Arthur Deikman has shown,<sup>7</sup> if you belong to an in-group, obey authority, and diminish dissent – which all these groups do in large doses – you will also end up devaluing others outside the group. So when it is the ultimate father figure (sometimes known as 'God'), who tells you what to do, anything can be done to destroy others in the name of that goal – the ultimate in devaluation. That is exactly what is happening in the Middle East today.

The 19<sup>th</sup> century American psychologist William James once said, "Religion, in the broadest and most general terms possible ... consists of the belief that there is an unseen order, and that our supreme good lies in harmoniously adjusting ourselves thereto".<sup>8</sup> However, religion as currently understood is particularly vulnerable to being misused, particularly in the Middle East, where it is so interwoven with social identity and is also a source of pride. As long as religion is fundamentally lived out as a cult, it risks being used to justify severe abuse.

### Looking in the wrong places for solutions

Many cures for extremism propose 'moderation' as the solution. On the surface, that appears sensible, but may not, in reality, be helpful. As neuroscientist Joe Herbert has said, "Young men are particularly liable to become fanatics... They readily identify with their group. They form close bonds with its other members. They are prone to follow a strong leader. They like taking risks on behalf of their group – and they usually underestimate the danger that such risks represent. If they didn't have these properties, they would be less willing to go to war, and therefore less able to fulfil one of their essential sociobiological functions."<sup>9</sup>

It is testosterone-laden young men who are most prone to these manipulations and who most easily join such groups. When their minds are inflamed, they will not readily listen to tepid or moderate answers. If counter-narrative messaging for radicalism is negative or uninteresting, it will go in one ear and out the other. While moderation may usefully be the goal once someone's needs are met in the right way, it will never be

the counter to extremism. The solutions need to come from a strong, positive counterweight that will diminish desire for the path of folly.

Declaring war on dangerous extremists, tracking them down and incarcerating them is not a solution either. Egyptian jihadism was born in Egyptian political prisons in the 1960s; ISIS leaders were formed in American jails in Iraq; and, today, French extremists graduate from French prisons. These are effectively breeding grounds for the problem.

It is also difficult to know where to look. According to Scott Atran, "Keeping full track of those suspected of being prone to violent acts is practically impossible: around-the-clock surveillance of a single individual requires 10 to 20 security agents, of which there are only 6,500 for all of France. Nor is it a matter of controlling the flow of people into France. France's Centre for the Prevention of Sectarian Drift Related to Islam (CPDSI) estimates that 90 per cent of French citizens who have radical Islamist beliefs have French grandparents and 80 per cent come from non-religious families. In fact, most Europeans who are drawn into jihad are 'born again' into radical religion by their social peers."<sup>10</sup>

A study conducted by the Rand Corporation has shown that, among 268 terrorist groups that operated between 1968 and 2006, only seven per cent were defeated militarily.<sup>11</sup> Even when they are crushed through armed force, they morph into more virulent forms, and transfer to other locales. Vladimir Putin has said that 5,000 to 7,000 people from Russia and other former Soviet states are fighting for ISIS in Syria. Even though Russia 'won' militarily in Grozny, the latent sources of extremism did not go away; they were displaced and may return to haunt Russia.

Meanwhile, the reality is that governance in the Arab world is a disaster zone. There is much corruption and often a total disregard for the citizen. Government services are poor if not non-existent; pollution and bad traffic are pervasive; economic opportunities are low; and the social fabric is frayed. This is even without the reality of severe conflict in Syria, the chronic threat of it in Lebanon, and its localised effects in Egypt. In fact, many individuals are doing remarkably well and demonstrating great resilience in such terrible circumstances. Yet the level of daily 'noise' is so high that people are kept busy just surviving and little attention is paid to the quality of human development. The persistent deference to cultural tradition in the region also discourages innovation and does not always help in the development and absorption of new ideas that could ameliorate the situation. In such a dire situation, many will not adjust well.

### A new direction to look in

So we need to look in another direction for solutions, towards political contexts and policies that create environments permissive of meeting basic needs. We need to begin with 'policy precursors' or principles that are based on the



**John Bell** is Director of the Middle East and Mediterranean Programme at the Toledo International Centre for Peace. He is an experienced mediator and diplomat who has worked for over 25 years with the United Nations, the Canadian government and various NGOs and universities on politics in the Middle East.

*This article is an extended version of the talk given by John Bell at the 2016 Human Givens Institute annual conference in Dublin in June.*

human givens paradigm, in order to get the political compass right:

- The focus should be on emotional gains, not just material gains: people do not put their lives at risk and sacrifice themselves only for material gains, or they would be mercenaries, rather than radicals.

- Many extremist recruits are seeking a life of struggle and comradeship, status and belonging.

We need politics and policies that permit them to meet these needs at the local level in compelling but sensible ways.

- Youth need to be offered the chance to dream and meet practical and constructive challenges, even on a small scale, or a context within which they can do so on their own (thus satisfying need for autonomy and sense

of purpose). Abstractions and platitudes, or a tired appeal to moderate Islam by older men, will not defeat the exciting lure of the extremists. Is there such a shortage of positive challenges in the world for young people to focus on, which would enable them to feel somehow 'heroic'?

This has successfully been done at local level in Pakistan and elsewhere. For instance, at age 16, Gulalai Ismail, her sister Saba and a group of friends set up the Seeds of Peace network to change the lives of young women in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, north-west Pakistan. They focused on women's role in society and trained young activists to challenge violent extremism. Twenty-five people have been trained and over 150 have since applied to join this movement of activists against religious and political extremism.<sup>12</sup>

If policy is based on such understandings, or uses them as an essential reference, then there is a greater likelihood that youth and others will develop immunity to becoming radicalised. This is a long-term process, the ideas needing to be digested and developed organically, not imposed from above by dulling bureaucracies.

### Further reflections on meaning

In January, 2015, in the middle of a cold Canadian winter, I took a train from Montreal to Toronto. I sat down to work on a book I am completing on these very issues. Sitting beside me was a young man from India, who was studying in Canada. I noticed that he was reading a book called *Man's Search for Meaning* by Victor Frankl. I had just finished citing Frankl in my book, and the coincidence set off an interesting conversation, at the end of which the young man from Kerala gave me his copy of Frankl's book.

Victor Frankl survived the Nazi death camps, "a brand plucked from the fire", as he describes it.

He suffered enormously. Beyond the endless threat of death, he was emaciated, shaved his face daily with broken glass, slept nightly beside victims of typhoid, and desperately tried to avoid blistering his feet – shoes were poor or unavailable – because an inmate who could not work was put to death. Many around him died, and Frankl noticed that those who could find and create meaning in the suffering, who thought of their

wives, or a book they wanted to write or anything that mattered to them, had a much better chance of survival. Those who gave up on life, and its meaning for them were the first to die.

Terrorists use meaning to inflict horror on the planet and they are not much different from the Nazis who made Frankl suffer. He, on

the other hand, managed to eke meaning out of the toughest circumstances. He knew it was key to his survival and he derived it in the very conditions that the malevolent had created. ISIS, like the Nazis, and others of their ilk, are trying to change the world to fit a powerful image in their mind, and they stop at nothing to do so. Frankl knew that all he could change was himself: "It is not freedom from conditions, it is freedom to take a stand within conditions" that matters. The contrast could not be more stark, and his philosophy is a powerful counterpoint to that of ISIS.

During the second Palestinian intifadah in 2002, a *New York Times* journalist had the following conversation with a young man:

"Are you sure that you want to be a martyr?"

"Yes, I want to be a martyr."

"Do you know what that means?"

"Throwing stones and Molotovs."

"No. That's not what it means. It means dying."

"I'll take a bullet in the leg."

"That doesn't make you a martyr. You would have to take one in the head."

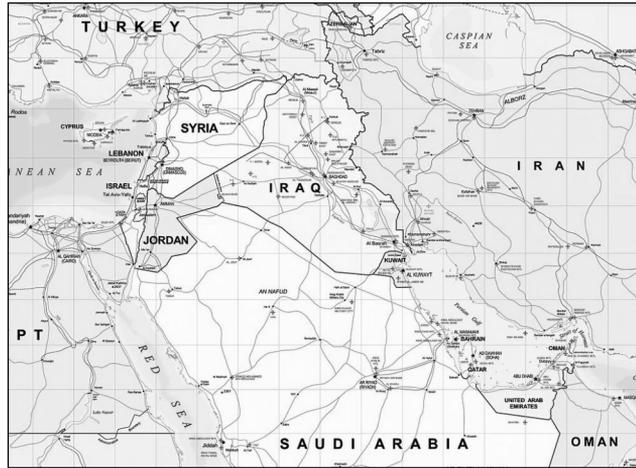
"My brother was shot in the head."

"To be a martyr it has to go all the way through.

Are you sure you want to be a martyr?"

"No. I want to be an architect."<sup>13</sup>

At a recent meeting in London, a colleague and I were sharing views about the region, both of us pessimistic about its coming future. He, however, insisted that the health of Blad al-Sham, or the countries of the Levant, was crucial for the health of the globe, despite their current descent into chaos. He may well be right. Possibly, centuries from now, that region may no longer be associated with martyrdom but with 'architecture', once again building a role on the global stage as a source of truer and more profound purpose. ■



**8** James, W (1902). *The Varieties of Religious Experience*. (<http://csp.org/experience/james-varieties/james-varieties3.html>)

**9** Herbert, J (2016). *What every dictator knows: young men are natural fanatics*. Aeon. (<https://aeon.co/ideas/what-every-dictator-knows-young-men-are-natural-fanatics>)

**10** Atran, S and Hamid, N (2015). *Paris: the war ISIS wants*. The New York Review of Books. (<http://www.nybooks.com/daily/2015/11/16/paris-attacks-isis-strategy-chaos/>)

**11** Jones, S G and Libicki, M C (2008). *How terrorist groups end*. RAND Corporation. ([http://www.rand.org/pubs/research\\_briefs/RB9351.html](http://www.rand.org/pubs/research_briefs/RB9351.html))

**12** Scott Atran on youth, violent extremism and promoting peace (2015). *Neuroanthropology*. (<http://blogs.plos.org/heuroanthropology/2015/04/25/scott-atran-on-youth-violent-extremism-and-promoting-peace/>)

**13** Finkel, M (2000). *Playing war*. The New York Times Magazine, December 24. (<http://www.nytimes.com/2000/12/24/magazine/playing-war.html>)