An alternative approach to the phenomenon of ISIS

"Understanding the behaviour of ISIS by considering it as an apocalyptic cult"

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Supervisor:	**Dr. F.P.S.M. Ragazzi**
	f.ragazzi@fsw.leidenuniv.nl
Co-reader:	**Prof. dr. I.C. van Biezen**
	i.c.van.bieze@fsw.leidenuniv.nl
Student:	**H.F. Gille**
	h.f.gille@umail.leidenuniv.nl
Student Number:	**1121510**
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Abstract

Recent attacks on European cities and the ongoing conflict in Syria and Iraq are prime illustrations of the disruptive influence of ISIS on the region and the world. In contemporary literature ISIS is generally described as a rational terrorist organisation with political and territorial goals. However, upon closer inspection there are actions and choices made by ISIS that do not appear to be rational. In order to explain these irrational actions and choices in a rational way, this thesis uses the theory of bounded rationality. According to bounded rationality, the rational decision-making process of an actor is limited by its environment and availability of alternatives. The apocalyptic ideology of ISIS imposes such constraints on the rationality of ISIS that this thesis examines whether irrational behaviour of ISIS becomes rational when taking into consideration the motivations and incentives provided by the apocalyptic ideology. The research is carried out by an interpretive case study analysis examining primary and secondary sources describing the actions and underlying motivations for ISIS. An analysis of the available sources shows that seemingly irrational behaviour of ISIS can be explained as rational when considering it as an apocalyptic cult with corresponding motivations. The eschatological view provided ISIS with a rationale for its actions and strategic choices. This research has contributed to a more complete understanding of ISIS and religiously motivated violence in general.

Introduction

By mid-October 2014, the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria, henceforth referred to as ISIS, presumably commanded over 31.000 fighters and gained control over a considerable territory (Lister, 2014, 16). Tens of thousands of Muslims are thought to have immigrated to support the struggle of ISIS and to live in the caliphate. Recruits of ISIS are coming from almost every nation (Wood, 2015, 8). The widespread nature of the caliphate of ISIS and its adherers across the globe clearly illustrate that ISIS has extensive influence in the region and worldwide (Gulmonhamad, 2014, 6-7).

In contemporary literature ISIS is considered as a terrorist organisation, with political and territorial goals, which behaviour is understandable from a rational perspective. Gulmonhamad describes the rise of ISIS and its strategic choices, in which he goes into detail regarding its financial situation (2014, 2-3). Due to strategic choices, ISIS gained control over oil fields and accumulated profit, together with illicit trades such as extortion, blackmailing and black market antique selling which made ISIS a wealthy non-state actor that managed to earn approximately 2 million dollars per day in 2014. This made it the wealthiest terrorist organisation in the world (Lister, 2014, 2). Hamid argues that the behaviour of ISIS is rational and based on strategic and military objectives. By instigating a conflict that forced Western powers to take action, ISIS justifies its struggle, corresponding actions and ideology that it is fighting against a greater evil (2015). Furthermore, attacks on European cities and public execution of Westerners could be part of a more elaborate strategy; forcing the US and other Western countries to rely to a greater extent on autocratic allies such as Assad, ISIS undermines their credibility (Lister et al., 2014). When considering the examples above, it appears that ISIS is a rational actor.

However, there are aspects of ISIS's behaviour that cannot be explained by simple rationality aimed at political or territorial gains. One might consider the attacks on European cities as a warning for ISIS's enemies to no longer engage in warfare against the caliphate. However, this had not the desired effect; France, one of the most persistent opponents of ISIS, did not retreat but intensified its military output. An explanation might be forcing the West to go all in because it would provide confirmation of ISIS's narrative and be appealing to potential members, similar logic is used by Al-Qaeda. The difference between ISIS and Al-Qaeda is that ISIS is located at an identifiable territory as a proto-state; this makes it more vulnerable for western retaliations (Hamid, 2015). For comparison, a small state with little military strength would logically not attack greater military powers because of fear of retaliations directed at their population or territory. However, ISIS is willing to accept retaliations for the sake of their cause (Roy, 2017, 52). Beheadings of American journalists had the same effect; the result was an intensification of military input of the adversaries of ISIS (Lister, 2014). Provoking these Western powers becomes even more irrational when taking into account the fact that

the West did not considered ISIS as a major problem. Western military output included little more than precision bombardments (Roy, 2017, 89). This changed after ISIS attacked Europe and ISIS's adversaries became committed to intensify their opposition (Gartenstein-Ross, 2015).

ISIS allocates a significant amount of resources to capture the specific territory of Dabiq, Syria. Although this small village near the border with Turkey does not seem to be of any military importance ISIS appears to be very eager to capture this specific village. This is especially surprising due to the fact that ISIS expended a vast amount of military equipment and personnel which could better be used to capture strategically more important territory. This shows that ISIS is motivated by something else than political or strategical gains (McCants, 2015, 147). Furthermore, the recruitment of foreign fighters, the thriving force behind ISIS, has been declining since 2015 (Hamid, 2015). The intensified military output of Western forces and the declining number of recruits are the sole effects of choices made by ISIS (Gartenstein-Ross, 2015).

Thus, in some instances the behaviour of ISIS is difficult to explain and does not make sense when taking an outsider's perspective. These irrational actions might be explained by considering them as miscalculations, bad strategic choices or religious symbolism, but this irrational behaviour is occurring structurally. Therefore, an explanation that relies merely on the fallacies in ISIS's behaviour or symbolism is not satisfying. When taking into consideration the fact that ISIS appears to be motivated by religion, it gives way for a more complete understanding of its behaviour. Last decades, there were numerous organisations, motivated by religion, which appeared to be irrational. However, it became possible to rationalize the behaviour of these so-called 'apocalyptic cults' when exploring their motivations. Such organisations include Heaven's Gate (Stewart and Harding, 1999, 289), the People's Temple and Aum Shinrikyo (Lifton, 2008, 303). Adherers of these organisations were so committed to a higher goal that they were even willing to end their lives to achieve this goal proclaimed by their ideology (Trompf, 2013, 63). This thesis researches whether ISIS's behaviour can be explained when taking into account the incentives and motivations for its behaviour from the perspective of an apocalyptic cult.

ISIS: rational terrorist organization?

Terrorism

In order to provide a clear understanding of the contemporary literature describing ISIS as a terrorist organisation, it is important to describe what the concept of terrorism entails. To what extent does ISIS match with the characteristics of a terrorist organisation and by which events is this illustrated? Ruby (2002) discussed the various definitions of terrorism and came to the conclusion that it is defined via the presence of three criteria. First, terrorism is politically motivated and meant to influence governmental policy. Furthermore, it is directed at non-combatants who are not able or prepared to defend themselves against the violent attacks. Ruby's third criteria is the notion that that terrorism is perpetrated by non-state actors (2002, 9-11). Examples of such non-state actors are the IRA, ETA and the PLO (Heywood, 2007, 283). This point is heavily disputed by authors that argue that states are also capable of terrorism. According to Westra, states are just as capable of violating human rights by targeting civilians for political gain or influencing support for governmental policy (2012, 5-12). These terrorist acts are often carried out during armed conflicts as acts of war. Therefore, they are often not regarded as acts of terrorism. However, attacks carried out by states against non-combatants, e.g. the US using napalm in Vietnam or Russian gulag camps (Balmforth, 2013), should be considered as terrorism as well. This notion that not only non-state actors are capable of terrorism is important because ISIS transcended beyond the level of a non-state actor into a type of proto-state (Hamid, 2015).

Thus, terrorism attempts to corrode the enemy's willingness to engage into conflict by instigating terror among indirect victims. When used by non-state actors, it is often considered as a weapon of the weak when conventional combat is not a feasible option in order to win the conflict (Heywood, 2007, 284-285). Perpetrators regard their position as undesirable because of their lack of bargaining power. They try to improve their bargaining position in the conflict by decreasing popular support for the enemy's cause (Lake, 2002, 17). It should be clear that states use terrorism to protect or reinforce the existing structure while non-state actors use terrorism to alter the current situation. Various authors agree with Ruby's description that terrorism aims to influence governmental policy and therefore their bargaining position by targeting non-combatants with attacks (Ruby, 2002, 9-11).

In addition to Ruby's three criteria, Lake (2002) and other authors argue that terrorism can be explained by regarding terrorists as rational and sensible actors. Non-state terrorists try to improve their political position with without engaging in direct combat and resorting to low-cost attacks that do some damage but are hard to prevent by the target population or state. By committing to terrorism, the perpetrators are able to instigate fear without exposing themselves on the battlefield (Lake, 2002,

15). For state-sponsored terrorists, terrorism may be a rational choice when it presents itself as the least costly way to force a population into submission without experiencing high costs (Nalbandov 2013, 97). Pape argues that these attacks are ways to instigate mounting civilian costs, either material or immaterial. These costs need to rise to the point that the enemy concedes to the demands of the perpetrating organisation or state (2003, 346). That being said, it should be clear that terrorism and violence are a means for terrorist organisations to achieve political objectives by instigating terror on rational considerations (Lake, 2002, 18).

ISIS

In contemporary literature ISIS is often described as a terrorist organisation with political objectives. According to Firestone, Jihadism and ISIS are military movements rooted in political Islam and are concerned with political objectives (2013, 263). At first sight ISIS fulfils the criteria discussed above with the notion that ISIS neither a non-state actor or a state but is located in the middle of this spectrum like a kind of proto-state (Hamid, 2015). Lister described ISIS as an actor whose behaviour and the corresponding actions are rational and lead to its current position as one of the most influential actors in the region (2014, 30-36). Its vast amount in numbers, territory, worldwide support and the extraordinary accumulation of capital makes it a risk for regional stability. Furthermore, it has taken control of numerous oil fields from which it exploits a significant profit to meet their demand for military assets (Gulmonhamad, 2014, 2). These military assets are increasingly obtained across the border, and some even say from states supporting ISIS such as Saudi-Arabia. In general, the economic strategy of ISIS seems to be very aggressive but rational nonetheless (Lister, 2014, 14-15).

ISIS's approach towards new recruits is very professionalized as well. ISIS spends a significant amount of time and energy in military and religious training professionalizing new recruits. Military training focusses on the use of weaponry while during the religious training, personal information and believes of new recruits are collected. After several weeks of extensive training, new recruits are assigned to guard duty before being sent off to frontline operations (Lister, 2014, 17-18). ISIS uses structured internal methods to reinforce the unity within the organisation and assures new recruits support the cause. According to Williams, the determination of ISIS to preserve the caliphate and the military strategy makes it an actor whose behaviour is rational; an irrational actor would not be able to withstand this determined opposition for this period of time. This is impressive when taking into consideration the fact that ISIS's adversaries possess significantly more assets than their rival (2015).

Recent terrorist attacks in Brussels, Nice and Paris make clear that the violent nature and ISIS's actions do not limit itself to the region. According to Wood (2015, 17), atrocities committed by ISIS are

aimed to hasten the conflict and avoid prolonged conflict. Perpetrating terrorist attacks to scare opponents from continuing their fight against ISIS makes sense. These attacks can be seen as prime examples of rational means of scaremongering by ISIS towards its opponents (Sungtaek and Seokjoo, 2016, 21-25). These attacks can be seen in line with the second criteria of Ruby due to the fact ISIS targets civilians in order to force their opponents to stop fighting ISIS (Roy, 2017, 1). The recent attack on youngsters at the concert in Manchester is another example of this gruesome tactic (Gartenstein-Ross, 2017). If the attacks of ISIS lead to diminishing support in the western countries for the conflict in Syria, scaremongering would be a viable explanation for ISIS's actions and made it logical to understand their motives (Lake, 2002, 19).

However, a decrease of support for the war in the targeted countries was not the case (Hamid, 2015). Despite Western retaliations, which for a rational actor does not seem the desired response, ISIS has continued to attack the population of its adversaries (Roy, 2017, 81). At first sight the behaviour of ISIS seems to make sense and to be logical from an outside perspective but upon closer inspection it appears that there are parts of ISIS's behaviour that cannot be explained when taking a rational outside perspective and regarding it as terrorism. ISIS appears to make irrational decisions and also engages in direct combat with the opposing military forces besides their attacks on civilians (Lister, 2014, 1). This engagement into direct combat is not characterizing for terrorist organisations (Ruby, 2002, 10). Therefore, this thesis will take into consideration the motives and incentives of ISIS for a deeper understanding of the organisation and its behaviour which appears to be irrational and not in line with the provided definition of terrorism.

Theoretical framework

The section above elaborated on contemporary literature that classified ISIS as a rational terrorist organisation. However, the previous section concluded with the notion that not all ISIS's actions can be explained by rationality or the definition of terrorism. In order to explain actions of actors which appears not to be rational, authors have tried to include the internal logic of such actors in their analysis. By doing this, rationality can be found in behaviour that prior seemed to be irrational.

Caplan states that the terrorist acts of organisations such as ISIS cannot be explained by applying simple rationality. He argues that seemingly irrational behaviour of actors can be considered as rational when taking into account the incentives and justifications provided by the internal logical of such organisations. Regarding terrorist organisations, such rationalizing incentives can take very simple forms; e.g. Al-Qaeda offered the families of suicide bombers financial compensation and

protection to persuade members to perform terrorist attacks. This is a very simple or basic incentive, but these motivations can be more abstract as well; the ideology of a terrorist organisation might provide affiliates with a different rationale that needs to be taken into consideration because it motivates them to act in a certain way (2005, 96). Wiktorowicz and Kaltenthaler agree with Caplan that the behaviour of terrorist organisations becomes rational when considering their ideological justifications and incentives (2016, 447). Thus, there is a need to look into the internal processes of ISIS and more specifically the Islamist eschatology profoundly present in the ideology to understand it to further extent and to formulate explanations for its seemingly irrational behaviour.

Bounded rationality

A theory that takes into consideration the limited information, limited alternatives and ideological justifications, and therefore is able to explain behaviour to a further extent, is bounded rationality. Herbert A. Simon laid the foundation for the theory of bonded rationality as early as 1957. According to Simon, the decision-making process that people go through is not merely rational but a search process guided by aspiration levels and availability of alternatives. No all alternatives are provided or available, thus the actor needs to find available options by investing time and effort. Full rational decision making implies that people would possess full cognitive capabilities, full knowledge and enough time to consider the available alternatives to come to the optimal conclusion. However, these requirements for optimal rational decision making are nearly unattainable in practice (Selten, 2002, 14-15). Thus, when trying to explain behaviour of a complex actor such as ISIS, it is necessary to take into consideration the bounded rationality imposed on such an actor.

According to bounded rationality (Selten, 2002), the degree to which an actor can make logical decisions is limited by various factors that heavily influence their decisions. Bounded rationality describes that these decisions are influenced by cognitive bounds, emotions, automated routine, available information, time-pressure and availability of alternatives. These aspects cause so-called *satisficing behaviour* in which people tend to choose for the first option they come across that is satisfactory instead of looking for the optimal solution. When an idea is adapted or a choice is made, people remain convinced that it is the best one. Furthermore, they adapt the believe that anyone who thinks otherwise is wrong. Due to this satisficing behaviour, ideas, ideology and therefore the choices made by people are heavily influenced by their surrounding and in some cases education. It has to be emphasized that people are in fact able to change their perception of the best choice. Due to aging, changing environments and new relations, original satisficing behaviour or choices can be altered.

Thus, in this thesis it is assumed that actors make *rational* decisions but their choices are in fact influenced by various variables in their surrounding (Selten, 2002, 14-16).

McKay and Dennett argue that ideologies create systematic misbeliefs that heavily guide the decisions made by individuals and groups. Scriptures provided by ideology together with norms and values create a framework leading to 'falsified' or seemingly irrational logic (2009, 536-537). The concept of *social surrounding* is defined as the environment, norms, ideology and forced commitment to the beliefs of the actor. The environment of a person entails its birthplace, education, intelligence and social relations. In this social environment, ideology might have an influential role. In this thesis, the concept of *ideology* entails the foundation on which its followers make decisions and judge other's behaviour (Tylor and Frazer, 2006, 24-25). This includes religion and norms advocated by ideology, and social pressure of conforming to these norms by their social surrounding. It should be emphasized that bounded rationality is not a competitor of rationality but a more developed and realistic explanation of behaviour by providing, for the ingroup, rational explanations (Selten, 2002, 15). The term *outsider's perspective* is used to describe a neutral view not influenced by limitations imposed by a bounded rationale.

Thus, bounded rationality explains how seemingly irrational behaviour becomes logical when taking into consideration the limitations imposed on the possible rationality. Discussed below is the research question, the hypothesis/argument and how this research will be carried out.

Research question

The question that guides this analysis of ISIS is: *to which extent can bounded rationality, entailed by the narrative of an apocalyptic cult, be used to explain the irrational actions of ISIS?*

Hypothesis

Bounded rationality will be applied to ISIS in order to understand its behaviour and the choices it has made. Besides as a terrorist organisation there is another way to look at ISIS and this is to look at it as an apocalyptic cult. Bounded rationality will be applied to ISIS by considering it as an apocalyptic cult. This means that in this thesis, motivations and characteristics of apocalyptic cults will be used to explain the behaviour of ISIS as rational but limited by bounded rationality. This perspective provides a viable explanation when including the necessity to take into account ideological justification and incentives of organisations.

ISIS's global Jihad (McCants, 2015, 103) seems to be founded on the idea dating back to the 8th century that a final battle between the true Muslims and the nonbelievers will take place. This idea comes forth from the Hadith, the leading scriptures for ISIS written after the death of Mohammed, and is considered as leading by the militant organisation (Dabiq issue 1, 2015, 4). This idea of an apocalypse motivates adherers of ISIS to engage in combat and that these true Muslims will be saved when they conquer the Syrian city of Dabiq (Roy, 2017, 56). Due to the influence of eschatology, the hypothesis of this thesis is: *By looking at ISIS as an apocalyptic cult, bounded rationality makes it possible for rationality to be found in behaviour that prior seemed irrational.*

Lifton (2000) constructed a framework for behaviour of apocalyptic cults on the basis of research on the Japanese apocalyptic cult Aum Shinrikyo which committed several terrorist attacks. Lifton defines apocalyptic cults as organisations envisioning that the world will be destroyed or renewed dramatically. Adherers of an apocalyptic cult are often completely emerged in the organisation and are exposed to a totalitarian control. This ideology of an apocalypse is used by leaders of the cult for aggressive indoctrination of followers and as justification for the use of violence (2000, 202-207). Lifton formulated twelve characteristics by which behaviour of apocalyptic cults can be explained. Seven of these apply to internal logic of cults: megalomaniac and totalitarian leadership, a vision that the world will endure an apocalypse, justification for killing by seeing it as a means to heal, need for purification of physical existence, use of heavy weaponry, shared state of aggressive numbing and extreme manipulation with a claim to absolute truth (Lifton, 2000, 202-207). The five remaining psychological characteristics are used by La Palm regarding ISIS. These are: milieu control, mystical manipulation, demand for purity, forced confession, dispensing of existence (2014, 1-7). These characteristics shall be used as the definition of apocalyptic cults. Arguments of other authors regarding ISIS are linked to these characteristics for means of illustration and clarification.

Argument 1: Islamist eschatology explaining irrational resource allocation

The first and perhaps most substantial argument in favour when considering ISIS as an apocalyptic cult, is its emphasis on a grand renewal or transformation of the world. This apocalyptic vision of the world coming to an end is certainly not at new phenomena. This idea is one of the strongest motivations for apocalyptic cults to act in the way they do. (Lifton, 2000, 202). Islamist eschatology is described in the Qur'an but this would mean every Muslim would believe in the apocalypse what certainly is not the case (Qur'an 2:8-10 and 31:31-35). However, it is described in more detail in the *Hadith.* Therefore, ISIS has expended large amounts of time, money, weapons and personnel order to capture the small town of Dabiq (McCants, 2015, 23). Although it seems irrational

to expend such amounts of resources in order to capture this village it becomes logical when considering that ISIS's rationality is influenced by the belief in the ideology that this town is important for the forthcoming apocalypse.

This argument is operationalised by looking at *resource allocation* decided upon by ISIS and underlying motivations. This includes why ISIS decides to allocate resources for specific territorial assets or uses weapons to inflict harm onto specific casualties while these actions are not logical from an outsider's perspective.

Argument 2: Prerogative determining who are saved rationalizes its military strategy

ISIS's ideology provides a prerogative to determine who are saved and who are not. This aspect of a black and white world is a fundamental characteristic among apocalyptic cults (Lister et al., 2014). In practice, this means that outsiders should either be converted or killed. Especially the executions of American journalists and the burning of a Jordan fighter pilot are illustrative events of this prerogative that only intensified the opposition to ISIS (Hamid, 2015). After this became public, the Jordan government vowed to intensify the fight against ISIS as a means of blood vengeance (Su, 2015). These actions are in line with Lifton's characteristic that apocalyptic cults want to purify the world which at the same time functions as a means of justification for the use of force (2000, 267 & 27). Provoking adversaries of ISIS to intensify their fight against the caliphate seems irrational but these acts and the retaliations are used as a confirmation that ISIS's cause is just (Claridge, 1999, 138). Furthermore, ISIS refuses to cooperate with similar organisations. By refusing to cooperate, ISIS neglects the possibility of allies and choses to have more adversaries. The adherers of ISIS are so committed to their ideology that they reject all alterative truths followed by infidels. Therefore, ISIS believes that it goes against their ideology to cooperate with those who not believe in the right form of Islam which makes this choice understandable.

Operationalization of this argument is done under the term of *military strategy*. This covers strategic choices ISIS has made regarding the use of force against its opponents or infidels. This includes the attacks on European cities, the battle for the caliphate, possible cooperation with other actors in the region and the brutal public executions of captured enemies.

Argument 3: ISIS's ideology of being saved, even upon death, rationalizes its disposal of worldly existence

Lack of self-preservation of ISIS fighters during combat has been reported numerous times. It appears that ISIS's fighters do not fear death during combat situations or terrorist attacks. Besides their willingness to cause casualties among unharmed civilians and military forces, they appear to be eager to die for their cause (Roy, 2017, 56). These acts, which appear to go against any idea of rationality can be explained when looking into the beliefs of ISIS. According to them, death does not mean defeat, it is considered as a victory and being saved (La Palm, 2014, 7). The idea of being saved upon death functions as a significant motivation to fight or even die for the cause of ISIS (Barron and Maye, 2017).

This shall be operationalized via c*ombat behaviour* and entails the behaviour of ISIS's fighters during armed combat. This includes tactics, behaviour towards opponents and specifically the lack of self-preservation shown during these battles.

Argument 4: Milieu control and internal purity advocated by ISIS is rational when including their commitment to their cause

ISIS uses the claim to an absolute truth to exert their control deeply into the personal life of adherers including their relations to one another and activities (La Palm, 2014, 2). Communication both inside and outside is strictly monitored with harsh punishments when rules are violated. Threat, force, coercion, abduction or deception is used when they do not comply to the set rules (Binetti, 2015, 3). A strict internal control appears rational from an outsider's perspective but the live broadcasted executions and punishment of affiliates of ISIS does certainly not increase the willingness of foreigners to travel to the caliphate by which ISIS inflicts damage upon itself. However, ISIS strives to keep its followers a pure as possible. Any impurity will corrupt its cause and therefore be an insult to the holy scriptures of Mohammed and the Hadith. (Warner, 2010, 15). The pressure exerted by the adherers of ISIS towards their fellow believers creates an environmental confirmation of their rationale.

Management of membership (Human resources management of ISIS) entails the strategy used by ISIS regarding the relation between the leaders of the organisation and the affiliates. This includes the internal construction of ISIS, the enforcement of ideology, punishment, forced confession, communication, recruitment of potential new fighters and the education aimed at the persuasion and indoctrination of new recruits.

Methodology:

The research consists of a hermeneutic case study analysis of ISIS and its behaviour. The different forms of hermeneutic research are guided by interpretation of texts and events in order to provide explanations for the subject of study. From the several forms of hermeneutics, this research uses conventional hermeneutics (Babb, 2012, 364-365). Conventional hermeneutics focusses on four elements; authorial intention, nature or genre of the text, context and the role of the 'reader'. These elements seem to imply that hermeneutics only focusses on texts, however, in conventional hermeneutics occurred events are also considered among the available evidence. For a more complete understanding of ISIS it is necessary to take all available evidence into consideration including the context and meaning of texts and actions (Taylor et al., 2016, 162). Therefore, for means of data collection, both primary and secondary sources shall be consulted. The primary sources will consist of the holy Qur'an and translated documents of ISIS such as the Hadith and ISIS's magazine *Dabiq,* renamed to *Rumiyah* after ISIS lost control of Dabiq. Secondary literature consists of academic articles, books and published news articles on ISIS. Thus, this thesis makes use of historical sources and present-day events. This is done by using the theory of bounded rationality (Selten, 2000) the four arguments, Lifton's characteristics (2000, 2000-2009) and a study of existing literature. Empirical evidence shall be examined via the four arguments and subsequently assessed on the basis of the hypothesis, research question whether ISIS can be understood to a further extent when considered as an apocalyptic cult whereby its rationality is bounded by this narrative.

Limitations

Limited access to primary sources can be seen as one of the limitations of this research. Due to the fact that the writer of this thesis is not able to read the original texts in Arabic, translations will be regarded as primary sources in this thesis which might lead to misinterpretations. Therefore, any assumptions or conclusions made in this thesis might be contradicted by sources which were not translated, available or accessible during the writing of this thesis.

Analysis of the four arguments

The section below will consist of the analysis of the four arguments mentioned above. Each argument will be constructed of examples of irrational behaviour of ISIS and how bounded rationality, with the narrative of an apocalyptic cult, is able to rationalize that behaviour. Rationalizing of irrational

behaviour in line with bounded rationality shall be done on the basis previously discussed primary and secondary literature. It should be clear that the four arguments elaborated on below, are heavily connected because they are all derived from the narrative of an apocalyptic cult as explained by bounded rationality.

The role of Islamist eschatology in the ideology of ISIS and its corresponding resource allocation

Allocation of resources by ISIS comes forth from one of the foundations of its ideology; the idea of an apocalypse (McCants, 2015, 23). In the Qur'an, there are small sections that hint that an apocalypse is part of the Muslim ideology and therefore cannot be used to defend this claim (Qur'an 2:8-10 and 31:31-35). However, in the Hadith, there are concrete indications that the world is at the brink of an apocalypse. In fact, even the exact location and the catalyst that will start this apocalypse are described in these additional scriptures (Sunnah, book 54, Hadith 44)

Since 2015, this idea has taken a prominent place in the ideology of ISIS motivating them to wage war with the West for the final battle between the "Romans" and the true Muslims (Roy, 2017, 54). The terminology of "Romans" can in this context be interpreted as the Western world based on Christian norms and values. The stage of this forthcoming apocalypse is located in Northern Syria near the border with Turkey at the small town of Dabiq (Hamid, 2015). Apart from the prophecies foretold in the Hadith about this grand renewal of the world (Sunnah, book 54, Hadith 44), there is no rational explanation for ISIS to invest significant amounts of resources in order to capture this village. Control over the town of Dabiq does not involve strategic, military or financial advantages over Western powers that currently control the town (Hamid, 205). According to the Hadith the grand battle will take place when the "Romans" have landed at this specified territory and confront ISIS with full force (Wood, 2015, 5). Thus, for adherers of the prophecy it is of great importance they are waiting for the "Romans" at Dabiq and are therefore willing to engage in seemingly irrational behaviour to do so. Despite of the great amount of resources expended battling over this territory, for ISIS the control over Dabiq will be considered a major victory in their fight and fulfilling its destiny as portrayed by their ideology (Roy, 2017, 54).

Expansionist urges can be seen as another aspect of ISIS's behaviour that does not make sense from an outsiders' perspective. Why would ISIS invest such great amounts of resources to engage into an all-out conflict with its adversaries while investing in the established territory of the caliphate? Taking the scriptures of the forthcoming apocalypse into consideration it appears that the establishment of the Islamist caliphate is not the objective for ISIS (McCants, 2015, 102-105). It appears to be a means to achieve something greater than creating a state. Connected to the idea of a final

great battle between "Romans" and Muslims is this seemingly irrational perception of war in the ideology of ISIS and its corresponding allocation of resources. *"The state preceding the apocalypse is indeed a state of war, not of peace and justice, and so the very essence of ISIS is to be at war"* (Roy, 2017, 55). When assuming the rationale of ISIS is heavily influenced by the idea of a forthcoming apocalypse this starts to make sense. Why would ISIS invest time, resources and effort in conquering additional territory while maintaining what they already control is already a challenge? These strategic choices caused ISIS to suffer significant losses regarding oil exploitation and refining (ICCT, 2016, 66). It appears that ISIS prefers engaging in conflict with the West over imposing security on territory they already control (Hamid, 2015). The rational explanation can be found in the objective they try to fulfil; engaging in war with the West, or in their words "the one-eyed Deceiver". Defeating the "Romans" is not the objective, the war is a means to instigate the forthcoming apocalypse leading to salvation (McCants, 2015, 106).

The continuous fight of ISIS in order to instigate the apocalypse weighs heavier than preserving the established caliphate which already starts to crumble under the pressure of the adversaries of ISIS. There are many signs that display the weakness of ISIS on the ground where it used to be one of the most powerful actors in the region. A position they have given away for the sake of their fight against the "Romans" (Gulmonhamad, 2014, 7). This seemingly irrational choice of ISIS to invest in conflict rather than state-building is a prime example of ISIS's behaviour that could only be understood as rational when taking into consideration its motivations.

Prerogative to determine who are saved and military strategy

A profound characteristic of ISIS is its lack of willingness to compromise or negotiate with its adversaries or other communities in the region. ISIS continues to have no respect for set borders, authority or international law that is agreed upon in the international community. The unlimited desire of ISIS to expand its grip on the region and exerting worldwide influence, means that the fighters for the caliphate have entered a death pact from which it seems they are not planning step away from. Even with declining numbers of new adherers, severe losses of territory and little to no chance of a bright future, ISIS continues to fight (Roy, 2017, 3-4). Order in the international system since the peace of Westphalia is based on the mutual recognition of the sovereignty of states and their corresponding borders. Other Muslim organisations in that region succumbed under the pressure of the international community via organisations such as the UN. The Muslim Brotherhood, Hamas and even the Taliban are examples of organisations that have proved to be willing to negotiate with states and international organisations. For ISIS, respect for borders of sovereign states appears not to be an option given their

military strategy and continuous expansionist urges. Therefore, ISIS considers the fact that these organisations that proved to be willing to negotiate as acts of apostasy (Wood, 2015, 18)

The aggressive behaviour of ISIS does not limit itself to its continuous fighting with adversaries from the Western opponents but also includes other Muslims. According to Roy, ISIS even attacked the Palestinian refugee camp in Yarnouk Syria, certainly not an action for the purpose of military strategy based on a clear rationale (2017, 10). It appears that the offensive strategy of ISIS is aimed at everyone that does not follow ISIS's interpretation of Islam including their fellow Muslims (Wood, 2015, 5). The lack of willingness of ISIS to accept other versions of Islam is illustrated by their reluctance to cooperate with other Muslim organisations. ISIS made clear that cooperation with similar organisations, e.g. Al-Qaeda and Al-Nusra, is not likely unless there would be a dire need for cooperation. ISIS considers fighters of AL-Qaeda as "Jews of the Jihad", an insult that makes clear that ISIS certainly does not feel connected with Al-Qaeda. In their turn, Al-Qaeda regards ISIS to be deviant from true Islam and argues that ISIS corrupted Islam (Hassan, 2016). After ISIS attacked mosques and it became public that ISIS treated Muslims the same as infidels, Al-Qaeda publicly distanced itself from the actions and ideology of ISIS. Bin Laden himself, condemned the brutal actions of ISIS especially those directed at Muslims and the Islamist tribes (McCants, 2015, 44-45). The relation of ISIS and tribes that can be found in its territory is a complex one and two-sided. On the one hand, ISIS has persecuted the tribal leaders, imprisoned, killed and replaced them in order to establish control over the territory and the people by all means necessary. On the other hand, these tribes are useful for ISIS for shelter and local governance. It seems that ISIS has decided to tolerate some local tribes but only as long as they are willing to comply completely with ISIS's ideology (Roy, 2017, 54-85).

It appears to be strange and irrational that such an organisation as ISIS disregards almost any chance of cooperation with other organisations or the chance of a peaceful settlement of the differences with the West. However, when assuming that the rationale of ISIS is heavily guided by its identity of an apocalyptic cult and its corresponding characteristics, it becomes rational. In the Hadith, it is written that believers should not befriend nonbelievers, those who do this will be saved (Warner, 2010, 4). The eschatologist beliefs of an apocalyptic organisation entail a prerogative for the organisation for who deserves to be saved and who are not as a means of purification of the world. This implies a creation of a black and white world in which there are believers and infidels (Lifton, 2000, 204). In the ideology of ISIS this believe is so strong that they can justify the killing and are even obligated to cleanse the world of infidels. In the Hadith, it is said that it is not enough to adhere to the 'true form' of Islam to be saved, it is required to be actively engaged in the purification of the world of infidels and those who have inflicted harm to the Muslim community (Roy, 2017, 52). In spite of the fact that this harm inflicted on the Muslim community is never specified in the scriptures of ISIS it is

used to justify and rationalize its violent actions against the "Romans" (Roy, 2017, 47). The general command of purification and justification of done harm is clearly illustrated by the following citation from the Hadith "*Even Jihad is inferior unless a man knowingly risks and loses both life and property for the sake of Allah*" (Warner, 2010, 15).

The features of bounded rationality that believers of one truth reject the possibility of alternatives (Selten, 2002, 14-16) lines up with ISIS's idea of one absolute truth, a characteristic generally found in apocalyptic cults (Lifton, 2000, 207). Rejection of alternative beliefs, even variations of Islam, or the willingness to negotiate with the West becomes a rational decision when taking into consideration that the adherers of ISIS are committed to the scriptures of the Hadith in which they are obligated to actively engage in conflict with the false believers, both Muslim or "Romans". The commitment of ISIS Jihadi fighters is so significant they are willing to engage in a prolonged war even against possible partners increasing the risk of defeat. But as will be elaborated on in the next argument; for Jihadi fighters, death does not mean defeat.

Disposal of worldly existence and combat behaviour of ISIS's combatants

Combat behaviour of ISIS is another part of ISIS's behaviour that needs further explanation due to the seemingly irrational behaviour that ISIS displays in those situations. Besides ISIS's irrational behaviour regarding resource allocation and military strategy, there have been remarkable observations of ISIS's Jihadi fighters in actual combat situations. Every rational human being would dive for cover when fired upon by the enemy in order to save his own life. However, there has been numerous reports of ISIS's fighters that they did not even flinch or searched for cover when adversaries opened fire (Lister et al., 2014). At first sight, this might be simply explained by the fact that a lot of Jihadi warriors are no experienced and are not used to armed combat and how to behave in such a situation. However, this behaviour is too reoccurring to be explained without looking further than the overboldness of the Jihadi fighters. As being said in the ending of the previous section, death does not mean defeat for the Jihadi fighters, it is even considered to be a victory (La Palm, 2015, 7). By giving his life for the cause the fighter has made the ultimate sacrifice and has therefore proven himself worthy to be saved. As put strikingly put in the Hadith "*..the gates of paradise lie in the shade of swords*". Although it should be mentioned that the entrance to paradise can be achieved by less than sacrificing one's life, fighting is encouraged in the scriptures as the quickest way to salvation (Warner, 2010, 15).

This rationale provided by the ideology of ISIS can be used to explain the willingness of Jihadi fighters to engage in suicide attacks as well. According to the Hadith, suicide is seen as a sin in Islam,

but killing yourself or getting killed during an act of Jihadism is not a sin but is seen as the highest form of Islam (Warner, 2010, 17). Suicide attacks are therefore perceived as the ultimate form of their commitment to the cause of ISIS (Roy, 2017, 2 & 5). As can be seen in the behaviour of earlier militant groups such as the Red Brigades, such fighters do not fear death of prosecution if their sacrifice is not in vain (2017, 99). From the recent terrorist attacks performed by adherers of ISIS directed at the Western civilian population, e.g. the Bataclan, almost all resulted in the death the of the perpetrators due the suicidal nature of the attacks or by being killed. It appeared that perpetrators of these terrorist attacks did not had the intention to escape after they committed these acts. The willingness of militant radicals to die is not a new phenomenon that appeared with the establishment of ISIS. However, it appears that the fighters of ISIS do not regard death as a necessary evil but are actually eager to be slain in combat (Roy, 2017, 2-4)

Disposal of worldly existence can be found an explanation for the brutal executions of captured personnel from the adversaries of ISIS as well. As being said, ISIS does not respect international laws including that prisoners of war that should be treated with dignity and respect during armed conflict given the fact that these prisoners no longer pose a threat to the opponent (Heywood, 2007, 256). Instead of detaining its prisoners, ISIS has brutally executed a large number of its prisoners on live broadcasts for the whole world to see. These executions are rehearsed numerous times in order to perfectionate the theatrical performance on an almost professional level (Roy, 2017, 50). A prime example of such a professionalized display of violence is the execution of the Jordan fighter pilot by burning him to death in front of an entire crowd while being filmed with several cameras (Su, 2015). These acts could be explained as an illustration of ISIS commitment to the cause or as symbolic. However, in the Hadith it is written that killing infidels is one of the ways a Muslim can achieve salvation (Warner, 2010, 8). Furthermore, ISIS did not commit these acts in order to scare their adversaries so that they would refrain from combat; ISIS is not willing to negotiate or negotiate with infidels in any way (Roy, 2017, 3). Furthermore, this display of ISIS's ways of dealing with prisoners of war did not achieve anything besides Jordan intensifying its fight against ISIS. Apart from the previously discussed argument that war is not a means but an end to ISIS, executions such as that of the Jordan fighter pilot can be rationally explained for ISIS from another incentive for the organisation as well. The disposal of worldly existence includes the altruistic murder of those who do not believe. By killing those who do not believe in ISIS's true form of Islam, Jihadi fighters cleanse the world of these people and at the same time improving the prospects of salvation for both the fighter and the people slain in the violent act. Thus, for the adherers these actions are seen as a type of altruistic murder from which both the believer and the infidels benefit (Lifton, 2002, 204).

ISIS's totalitarian control and its human resource management

Apart from the aggressive ideology of ISIS aimed at everyone that does not adapt ISIS's views, ISIS's ideology is also directed towards its own members (La Palm, 2014, 2). A chilling example of the internal totalitarian control of ISIS regarding the people living in the caliphate is the crucifixion of the 17-year-old Abdullah Bushi. In October 2014, the youngster was accused of filming one of the headquarters of ISIS on the countryside of Aleppo. His body was left at the site for everyone to see with a written warning for others not to disrespect the set rules endangering the purity of the caliphate (Manoum, 2014). In order to coerce the inhabitants of the caliphate to act according the set rules, special police forces are installed. These set rules entail the enforcement daily prayers, banning drugs, tobacco, alcohol, non-Islamic music and gambling, regulations for clothing and destruction of religious shrines (Lister, 2014, 26). This religious police travels around confronting people they come across with their sins. This includes the restrictions mentioned above but also women wearing see-through veils or stores selling water during Ramadan. Any offences are publicly punished in accordance to ISIS's laws. These punishments consist of whipping, stoning, hanging and beheadings (La Palm, 2014, 6 & Warner, 2010, 6). The public and gruesome nature of the punishment together with the fact that they are often filmed and broadcasted creates an atmosphere of fear among those living in the caliphate. There are numerous reports of people trying to escape the caliphate due to the extreme punishments fearing that they might be next. These broadcasted punishments also create a threshold for those who might join ISIS (Abdul-Zahra, 2016). Furthermore, the vast territory of the caliphate requires ISIS to constantly recruit new members for their cause. However, since 2015 the number of foreign fighters traveling to the caliphate has been diminishing at a steady rate. Together with significant losses of territory and income from oil ISIS has suffered, it is not rational to heavily punish those who are supporting ISIS and causing adherers trying to leave the organisation. Especially when these punishments are inflicted for minor offenses that could be punished in a way that creates less aversion among adherers and potential new adherers (Gartenstein-Ross, 2015).

New affiliates that have chosen to travel to the caliphate are not send off to fight for the caliphate within a considerable amount of time. Upon arrival, new recruits have to pass a series of interviews in which personal information is documented together with copies of passports and personal files. After these interviews, new recruits have to undergo several weeks of extensive religious training (Lister, 2014, 17-18). The religious training is aimed at teaching new recruits the true form of Islam and looking for indications that new recruits might be spies for the "Romans" (Abdul-Zahra, 2016). The military training is focussed on the use of pistols, assault rifles and sometimes other heavy weaponry. Upon completion of the training, new recruits are assigned to guard duty before being trusted enough to be send off for frontline military operations (Lister, 2014, 17-18). The strict

control of the fighters and the elaborate training and documentation of new recruits appears to be very time-consuming and a threshold for potential new fighters. Furthermore, the harsh punishments and strict control on the population of the caliphate seem to require significant time and effort as well. With the diminishing numbers of ISIS is would appear to be sensible to send new recruits as soon as possible to the frontline and cherish those inside the caliphate. However, when looking at underlying motivations for ISIS to exert this kind of strict control it becomes rational for the organisation.

Strict totalitarian internal control of adherers is common among apocalyptic cults. In order to achieve salvation, the adherers of the organisation should be completely pure and devoted to the cause (La Palm, 2014, 2). Any behaviour that is not in line with the ideology of the apocalyptic cult causes it to be corrupted endangering the salvation of the rest. For radicals all ideological, religious or political movements that came before them are rejected. Connection of adherers with these rejected ideas form liabilities for the pureness of the organisation. Therefore, communication of adherers is strictly monitored in order that will not diverge from the path of ISIS. By strictly controlling communication of those adhering ISIS, chances of them finding a different rationale among the available alternatives in the forms of science, religion and ideology, are limited (La Palm, 2014, 2). Commitment to purity seems to be rational and not to differ from the procedures of a regular army. However, the commitment to this purity is so strong among the ranks of ISIS that they are willing to purge among their own members and discourage potential members from joining. This seemingly irrational behaviour becomes rationalized when taking into account the fact that the ideology of ISIS prescribes internal purity as one of the perquisites to be saved (Lifton, 2000, 206).

Conclusion

The vast territory of the caliphate, the significant number of foreign fighters willing to fight for ISIS, its disruptive role in the region and the numerous attacks on Western citizens made the proto-state of ISIS significantly more influential than previous Jihadi organisations. The unique subject of ISIS, especially due to its extraordinary aggressive behaviour that seems to be irrational, has proven to a complex actor that should be examined in closer detail. This concluding section will briefly discuss the various arguments and points made in this thesis to come to a conclusion regarding the formulated research question: *"To which extent can bounded rationality, entailed by the narrative of an apocalyptic cult, be used to explain the irrational actions of ISIS?"*

In contemporary literature ISIS is often considered as a terrorist organisation that acts on the basis of rational assumptions. However, after researching the behaviour and the used ideological

scriptures of ISIS it became clear that there are aspects of ISIS's behaviour that cannot be explained when regarding ISIS as such. In this thesis, the theory of bounded rationality is used to formulate an additional rationale for the seemingly irrational behaviour of ISIS by taking into account its eschatologist ideology. The goal of this thesis is not to debunk the notion that ISIS is a terrorist organisation but rather to provide a rational explanation for aspects that are difficult to explain when considering it merely as a terrorist organisation.

As an addition to the commonly used explanation of terrorism for ISIS, this thesis highlighted the importance of taking into consideration underlying motivations and incentives provided by the ideology of the organisation. The analysis in this thesis was constructed out of four arguments that address different sections of the behaviour of ISIS. These four arguments were operationalized via the domains of resource allocation, military strategy, combat behaviour and management of membership. By exploring the behaviour of ISIS by the four domains rational explanations could be found in behaviour that prior seemed to be irrational. ISIS's eschatologist view of a final battle between the true Muslims and the army of "Romans" explains their commitment to continue their fight against the West even when jeopardizing the established caliphate. The eschatologist idea and that it is their objective to purge the earth from infidels, motivates ISIS to invest a great amount of resources in fighting instead of maintaining its caliphate. When a Jihadi fighter sacrifices his life during this fight he will receive salvation; death does not mean defeat, it is considered a victory. This provides a rational explanation for reported Jihadi fighters that do not duck for cover in combat situations; due to their beliefs death is not something they fear. Furthermore, all enemies of the caliphate that are slain are released from their life of sinners, justifying and encouraging the use of violence for ISIS. In order for those living in the caliphate to be saved, it is important to keep the organisation as pure as possible. Therefore, ISIS invests a significant amount of time and energy to keep the inhabitants of the caliphate and new recruits as pure as possible. This is done by harsh punishments when laws are violated and extensive training and strict monitoring of new fighters.

Based on the analysis of ISIS's seemingly irrational behaviour, this thesis has made a contribution to the field of behaviour of terrorist organisations, apocalyptic cults and rationalizing religiously motivated violence. With the use of the theory of bounded rationality and the narrative of an apocalyptic cult, this thesis has been able to provide rational explanations for various actions of ISIS that prior seemed irrational. However, it should be kept in mind that the limited access to primary sources might have led to conclusions that later might prove to be unjust. Furthermore, in this thesis a clear distinction between the motivations of the ranks of ISIS has not been made. It might be possible that higher ranks of the organisation use the forthcoming apocalypse as a means to attract new recruits and that all acts regarding this apocalypse are merely symbolic. This could be interesting to research

to a further extent. Therefore, it is important to further develop the research on the militant organisation of ISIS to investigate if the explanation of an apocalyptic cult is indeed a viable explanation for its seemingly irrational behaviour.

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