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# The Islamic State's Worldview as a Radical Terror Management Device

STUDIA I ANALIZY

**Abstract:** *The US reaction to 9/11 set off a chain of events leading to the raise of the most radical strain of revolutionary Salafism ideology incarnated by the Islamic State. The analysis of IS worldview allows one to observe its striking compatibility with the fundamental tenets of Terror Management Theory (TMT). The main proposition of this article is that the Islamic State's worldview should be interpreted as a product of an ideological evolution triggered/amplified by the Global War on Terror (GWOT), leading towards reenergization of the revolutionary Salafi narrative and increasingly radical – and thus psychologically efficient but strategically flawed – terror management device.*

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## Introduction

The purpose of this article is to analyze a narrative and a worldview of the Islamic State in the perspective of Terror Management Theory (TMT). The main proposition is that revolutionary Salafism in general and the Islamic State's ideology in particular could and should be understood as a radical, coherent and psychologically efficient terror management system, which is one of the important and largely overlooked reasons of its observable resilience, attractiveness and vitality. This article argues that the Islamic State's narrative shows great compatibility with the fundamental assumptions of TMT. It should be perceived as a product of an ongoing ideological evolution, partially trigged and partially amplified by the US reactions to 9/11 attacks and decisions made under the Global War on Terror (GWOT) framework and mindset. GWOT unintentionally led to empowering increasingly psychologically efficient terror management system that was capable of attracting a considerable number of people prone to adapt these kinds of radical solutions to existential anxiety (especially because of specific life situations, socio-political circumstances and personality treats). First, this article will shortly present the main premises of TMT and the basic narrative structure of the Islamic State. Then, the Islamic State's "Dabiq" magazine articles will be used in juxtaposition with TMT's depictions as a compelling illustration of the above-mentioned compatibility of the Islamic State's narrative. This second part considers such elements as the role of the charismatic leader declaring his determination to rebuild a sense of pride and dignity inside the "righteous community"; the narratives designed to boost individual and collective self-esteem; the guarantees of symbolic and literal immortality; the idea of an ideologically and morally "pure" society as a comfort-providing "safe place" free of existential dread; the tendency to derogate, assimilate, humiliate and ultimately eradicate alternative worldviews and its proponents; and the meaning of violence and martyrdom inside the worldview. Finally, the Islamic State's narrative and worldview will be summarized as a coherent, radical, psychologically efficient but strategically flawed systemic terror management solution.

## The fundamental premises of Terror Management Theory

Terror Management Theory (TMT) was born as a result of connecting the ideas formulated by cultural anthropologists Ernest Becker,

primarily from his book "The Denial of Death"[1], with a scientific apparatus and an experimental rigor introduced by three psychologists: Jeff Greenberg, Sheldon Solomon and Tom Pyszczynski. TMT was first publicly presented at the 1984 meeting of the Society of Experimental Social Psychology. It was then presented in an article published in 1986[2]. Up to this date, the assumptions of TMT have been confirmed by hundreds of psychological studies and recently explained and comprehensively summarized in the book "The Worm at the Core: On the Role of Death in Life"[3]. The fundamental idea of TMT is that human activity is driven mostly by unconscious efforts to deny and transcend death. The unique human awareness of mortality has a profound and pervasive effect on human thoughts, emotions and individual and collective behaviors. Inside human societies, an existential dread is universally mitigated by dedicated, elaborated social constructs, or cultural worldviews serving as a buffer between reality and the mind and thus playing a crucial, indispensable, adaptive role in human life. These constructs create imagined – but commonly perceived as real – "safe spaces" inside a hostile, chaotic and terrifying environment, which makes the existential dread manageable. They "give us a sense of meaning, an account for the origin of the universe, a blueprint for valued conduct on earth, and the promise of immortality"[4]. *Homo sapiens* is a unique biological species that commonly believes in a symbolic and individual immortality. Those two beliefs are crucial in the difficult task of managing terror resulting from death-awareness, which itself is a potentially devastating byproduct (epiphenomenon) of a self-consciousness.

Since the original formulation of TMT, hundreds of psychological experimental studies have demonstrated the empirical soundness of its premises[5].

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[1]   E. Becker, *The Denial of Death*, Free Press 1973.

[2]   J. Greenberg et al., *The causes and consequences of a need for self-esteem: A terror management theory*, [in:] R. F. Baumeister (ed.), *Public Self and Private Self*, Springer Verlag 1986, pp. 189–212.

[3]   J. Greenberg et al., *The Worm at the Core: On the Role of Death in Life*, Random House 2015. Further references are based the on Amazon Kindle Edition of this book, so the number of a chapter and the number of a paragraph is used instead of page numbers.

[4]   J. Greenberg et al., *The Worm…*, ch. 1, par. 23.

[5]   A. Rosenblatt et al., *Evidence for Terror Management Theory I: The Effects of Mortality Salience on Reactions to Those Who Violate or Uphold Cultural Values*, «Journal of Personality and Social Psychology» 1989, 57 (4), pp. 681–690; J. Greenberg et al., *Evidence for Terror Management Theory II: The Effects of Mortality Salience on Reactions to Those Who Threaten or Bolster the Cultural Worldview*, «Journal of Personality and Social Psychology»

Since these elements and mechanisms related to day-to-day management of existential dread are influencing virtually all dimensions of human activities, political scientists should certainly not ignore them. Including and integrating TMT to political studies can be very helpful in researching and explaining many crucial phenomena and categories, as political leadership and legitimization, political mobilization or political ideologies. Students of political radicalism, political violence and religious extremism should consider these elements especially worthy of attention.

## The basic narrative structure of the Islamic State's worldview

The worldview and the narrative of the Islamic State is firmly rooted in the so-called Jihadi-Salafism (revolutionary Salafism), which is a distinct ideological, political and social trend and movement inside Sunni Islam.

Salafism itself is the theological and social movement concerned mainly with purifying the Islamic faith from supposed "contaminations" of the varied kinds and thus affirming God's Oneness (*tawhid*) and His pure Revelation. Its intellectual beginnings can be traced to the Middle Ages, but the Jihadi, revolutionary variant of Salafism is a modern phenomenon inspired initially by the writings of Sayyid Qutb (and then by scholars like Abu Muhammad al-Maqdisi and Abu Basir al-Tartusi) and

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1990, 58 (2), pp. 308–318; J. Greenberg et al., *Why Do People Need Self-Esteem? Converging Evidence that Self-esteem Serves an Anxiety-Buffering Function*, «Journal of Personality and Social Psychology» 1992, 63 (6), pp. 913–922; J. Greenberg et al., *Evidence of a Terror Management Function of Cultural Icons: The Effects of Mortality Salience on the Inappropriate Use of Cherished Cultural Symbols*, «Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin» 1995, 21 (11), pp. 1221–1228; E. Jonas, P. Fischer, *Terror Management and Religion: Evidence That Intrinsic Religiousness Mitigates Worldview Defense Following Mortality Salience*, «Journal of Personality and Social Psychology» 2006, 91 (3), pp. 553–567; F. Cohen et al., *Fatal Attraction: The Effects of Mortality Salience on Evaluations of Charismatic, Task-Oriented, and Relationship-Oriented Leaders*, «Psychological Science» 2004, 15 (12), pp. 846–851; H. McGregor et al., *Terror Management and Aggression: Evidence That Mortality Salience Motivates Aggression Against Worldview-Threatening Others*, «Journal of Personality and Social Psychology» 1998, 74 (3), pp. 590–605; J. L. Goldenberg et al., *I Am Not an Animal: Mortality Salience, Disgust, and the Denial of Human Creatureliness*, «Journal of Experimental Psychology: General» 2001, 130 (3), pp. 427–435; M. J. Landau et al., *The Siren's Call: Terror Management and the Threat of Men's Sexual Attraction to Women*, «Journal of Personality and Social Psychology» 2006, 90 (1), pp. 129–146.

born as a reaction to Islamic political fragmentation (after the fall of Ottoman Empire), colonization (by Western powers) and modernization (including the influence of various forces and factors like nationalism, socialism, Pan-Arabism and general socio-cultural changes of contemporary Islamic societies)[6]. It should be described as a radical, violent political movement devoted to the case of overthrowing "apostate" regimes ruling in the Islamic world, ending the age of humiliation and corruption and restoring a universal, purely Islamic state (Caliphate). If Jihadi-Salafism should be understood as a radical fringe of Salafism, the ideology of the Islamic State is so far its most extreme version. Some scholars are calling this variant Neo-Takfirirsm[7] to stress the fact of its strained or even openly hostile relations with more "traditional" strains of jihadi organizations, its thinkers and leaders. This new variant is definitely an indirect byproduct of 9/11 and direct byproduct of GWOT: the chain of events started by the disruption of Al-Qaeda central in Afghanistan and then continued with an intervention in Iraq, emergence of local Sunni jihadi resistance against new regime dominated by Shia and supported by US occupants, cooperation and then conflict with Al Qaeda and finally the announcement of the Islamic State and then Caliphate. GWOT basically supported the narrative of the revolutionary Salafism: that counterterrorism is only a pretext used by the West in its historical quest for destroying Islam. It was a leading force and a key factor behind a further radicalization of an already radical worldview.

The main narrative arc of the Islamic State is based on the assumption that history of the humankind is a deterministic, linear and teleological process, a tool used by God to implement His great plans. It leads humanity from creation through its crucial stages and turning points to its inevitable culmination ultimately ending the existence of the material world. God's messages are established as a complete "user manual" to life. Humans are supposed to properly decode those sources of Revelation and to implement the guidelines and commandments as faithfully as possible. All human aspirations and ambitions should be subordinated to this imperative and the single purpose of earthly existence, which is to achieve individual immortality and to gain salvation. This earthly existence is an unequivocally theocentric realm: a mundane dimension is

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[6]  S. Maher, *Salafi-Jihadism: the History of an Idea*, Oxford University Press 2016.

[7]  E. Alshech, *The Doctrinal Crisis within the Salafi-Jihadi Ranks and the Emergence of Neo-Takfirism. A Historical and Doctrinal Analysis*, «Islamic Law and Society» 2014, 21 (4), pp. 419–452.

constructed as a pale and temporary illusion, a kind of perfect filter for selecting human beings to their "destined reality" free from limitations of time and matter. History is also described as gigantic battlefield where a constant war is raging on between the forces of light and darkness. There are no gray zones nor neutral actors – in the end, everyone must choose between clashing camps, just like God is choosing only between two fates for every human being[8]. This worldview is "radical" in a sense of allowing one to achieve only "extreme", "binary" results: between endless euphoria and the most terrible suffering. There is no spectrum of intermediate states, which makes the cost of any mistakes and the stake of the "game" the highest possible.

Salafism can be characterized by obsessive "contamination anxiety" – the contamination of the carriers of the Revelation is treated as the greatest danger that can manifest itself as "internal" (sinful innovations) or "external" ("cultural implants"), equally leading to the loss of identity resulting in the moral, political, economic, cultural and military collapse of the community of believers. Human moral and intellectual weakness leads to systematic and periodic distortion of God's messages, which, in turn, leads to degeneration and the fall of human societies and individuals. The general result is described as a "secondary ignorance" (modern *jahiliyyah*) of Islamic societies losing the contact with the divine inspiration. Among the gravest consequences of this degeneration for Islam and Muslims is a series of humiliations and defeats, culminated in Western colonization and domination. According to the jihadist (revolutionary) strain of the Salafi movement, the only solution for purifying humanity is to return to the pure Islam ("real Islam") – the postulated reconstruction must be complete, uncompromising and violent out of necessity.

This simple, easy-to-grasp, dichotomic vision of reality[9] is rooted in the conviction that Islam is the only valid way of life, designed in full compatibility with human nature (fitrah). It is holistic, universal, pragmatic and appropriate for all humankind. It overcomes and nullifies all other loyalties, communities and connections, biological or socially/ culturally constructed. All un-Islamic identities, value systems, norms, institutions and practices are treated as existential threats that must be eliminated at all costs. It is easy to see that this kind of binary logic of polarization is fully compatible with TMT predictions and observations[10].

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[8]  *The Extinction of the Greyzone*, «Dabiq», No. 7, p. 66.
[9]  *Kill the Imams of Kufr in the West*, «Dabiq», No. 14, p. 17.
[10]  J. Greenberg et al., *The Worm…*, Ch. 7, par. 68–69.

Another crucial element of this worldview is the conviction that the apocalyptic culmination of this great cosmic war is very near. The ultimate battle between the people of God united inside the Islamic State, led by the revolutionary vanguard and God's regent on Earth (Caliph), against the united forces of unbelief (*kufr*), hypocrisy (*nifaq*) and apostasy (*ridda*) is already going on in the material and spiritual spaces[11]. All human choices and activities in the "worldly life" are very meaningful and will have dire or glorious consequences in the coming eternity.

Inside this narrative, Islam is constructed as inherently violent and belligerent. Violence is neither an epiphenomenon of some casual circumstances nor a "defensive necessity" but it is the "hard core" of religion and a vital part of its legitimate *modus operandi*. It is not so much geopolitical in its nature and genealogy but rather eschatological and apocalyptic. The Islamic State is God's weapon, and all Muslims have a duty to protect it and to help in its expansion since the ultimate war is the only way to ultimate peace[12].

Violence is presented as a tool leading to the eradicating of any "gray zones" and to ultimate victory over all un-Islamic ("deviant") identities and value systems. The Islamic State is supposed to be a historical epilogue, the "eschatological catalyst" that starts the final countdown – a sequence of events leading to the end of the historical process. It is thus constructed as the only and the ultimate guarantor of the symbolic and individual immortality and is the source of the strongest possible individual and collective self-esteem. It is meant to transform Muslims from a passive object of exploitation, persecution and humiliation to the active subject able to exploit, persecute, humiliate and ultimately destroy the enemies of God. Inside this narrative, one can observe the high pressure on regaining lost dignity, pride and honor that is rooted in the urgency of rebuilding a sense of agency, control and domination and is directly connected to violence as an ultimate tool of power. There are also strong themes of assimilation, derogation, demonization and destruction of all enemies and alternative worldviews. Other important motives are "fortress under siege", heroism, martyrdom and aggressive masculinity.

The basic narrative structure of the Islamic State is strictly compatible with TMT premises. The Islamic State' worldview is clearly designed to strengthen the feeling of meaning, permanence, sense and purpose, to boost self-esteem and to offer the opportunities of symbolic and indi-

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[11] *Reflections on the final crusade*, «Dabiq», No. 4, pp. 32–44.

[12] *Islam is the Religion of the Sword, Not Pacifism*, «Dabiq», No. 7, pp. 23–24.

vidual immortality. It should be seen as a psychologically efficient, radical terror management system constructed under the growing pressure of the adverse circumstances constructed as the existential threat. The following sections analyze its particular elements in greater details.

## The role of the charismatic leader

The problem of legitimization is of crucial importance in the worldview and the narrative proposed by the Islamic State. It is fully in accordance with TMT authors' observations, that during periods of historical upheaval "people's allegiance may shift to an individual who exhibits an "unconflicted" personality – in the sense of appearing supremely bold and self-confident – and offers a grand vision that affords a renewed prospect of being a valuable part of something noble and enduring (…) this charismatic individual typically performs a striking initiatory act that shines a magnifying light on him, makes him seem larger than life, and enthralls followers who wish they had the courage to follow suit. Teeming with admiration and sensing a way to feel significant again, people join the cause of the seemingly larger-than-life leader as a revitalized basis of self-worth and meaning in life (…) charismatic leaders, therefore supplies what Rank aptly dubbed "collective immortality" to satisfy our aching need for heroic triumph over death"[13].

The above fragments are strikingly adequate to this article's case. First, there is a pervasive and almost universal conviction that the Islamic World is in deep crisis (a time of "historical upheaval") and that the cultural scheme of things no longer seems to provide a reliable basis for feeling significant and secure[14]. Then there was the Islamic State's carefully selected leader who exhibited an "unconflicted personality" and offered *a grand vision that affords a renewed prospect of being a valuable part of something noble and enduring*[15]. The leader performed a carefully designed

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[13] J. Greenberg et al., *The Worm…*, ch. 6, par. 58.

[14] A. Adnan, *Islam is in crisis*, «The Arab Weekly», July 31 2016, https://thearabweekly.com/islam-crisis; M. Durie, *Islam's Second Crisis: the troubles to come*, «Middle East Forum», February 13 2014, https://www.meforum.org/3750/islam-second-crisis; N. Echchaibi, *Muslims today face a deep malaise. We must confront it*, «The Guardian», June 17 2017, https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2017/jun/17/saudi-arabia-isis-islamic-state-crisis-muslim-world; F. Robinson, *Crisis of Authority: Crisis of Islam*, «Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society» 2009, 19 (3), pp. 339–354.

[15] All emphasis in the text are of the author.

*striking initiatory act that shines a magnifying light on him, makes him seem larger than life, and enthralls followers who wish they had the courage to follow suit.* The act was, in this case, an announcement of the revival of the Caliphate in June 2014 by Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi (referred to as Caliph Ibrahim) from the pulpit of the Great Mosque of al-Nuri in Mosul. The announcement was presented as an epochal act of colossal consequences:

"O Muslims everywhere (…) raise your head high, for today – by Allah's grace – you have a state and Khilafah, which will return your dignity, might, rights, and leadership"[16].

A few days earlier a spokesman of the Islamic State, Abu Muhammad al-Adnani stated:

"The time has come for those generations that were drowning in oceans of disgrace, being nursed on the milk of humiliation, and being ruled by the vilest of all people, after their long slumber in the darkness of neglect – the time has come for them to rise. The time has come for the Ummah of Muhammad (…) to wake up from its sleep, remove the garments of dishonor, and shake off the dust of humiliation and disgrace, for the era of lamenting and moaning has gone, and the dawn of honor has emerged anew"[17].

One can clearly see crucial TMT themes here: "waking up" (political mobilization and unity under one, charismatic leader representing God on earth and being responsible for implementing His will) and regaining lost self-esteem as the keys to victory.


## Islamic utopia as a "safe space"

Before discussing the idea of a "safe space", another crucial component and theme of TMT – the strong need to dismiss alternative worldviews – must be referred to:

"We have to believe in our own truths to sustain the precarious view that life is meaningful and that we are significant, enduring beings. 'One culture is always a potential menace to another' (…) Our entire way of live, everything we believe in and everything we strive for, can be challenged by alternative worldviews"[18].

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[16] *Khilafah Declared*, «Dabiq», No. 1, p. 7.
[17] Ibidem, p. 8.
[18] J. Greenberg et al., *The Worm…*, ch. 7, par. 11–13.

The Islamic State was supposed to be a universal utopia offering the precious comfort of high esteem, meaningful life and the prospects of symbolic and individual immortality to its believers. All these benefits would serve as a currency to pay for political mobilization, loyalty and involvement in the extremely dangerous task of defending and expanding a new state. To achieve this goal it had to become a sociocultural "safe space" free of any disturbances resulting from contacts with any people, values, norms, contents or behaviors incompatible with dominating, singular orthodoxy and orthopraxy[19].

The other worldviews are by definition hostile and have a powerful, corrosive, corruptive influence that leads to the lowered high-esteem and the destruction of Muslim identity, which would be the destruction of the only buffer between the human mind and existential dread. "Deviant" cultural worldviews are spreading like contagious diseases – to keep one's spiritual health intact a believer must live among the healthy, avoiding contact with the infected and the products of their depraved imagination[20].

In the face of such mortal dangers, the main role and the source of the attractiveness of the Islamic State was to create and to maintain this kind of "pure" environment for its citizens, to offer them the strongest possible sense of meaning and a stable, beneficial position inside an equally stable fabric of a culturally constructed worldview. The crucial requirement to accomplish this task was defined as an absolute and necessary denial of individual freedom of choice, since such freedom inevitably leads to fragmentation of human narratives and thus to the destruction of an equanimity resulting from a convincing illusion of inhabiting the same, coherent, meaningful reality. The deviant and existentially dangerous "methodology of free choice" must be replaced by the "methodology of intellectual terrorism"[21].

The normative mission of the state is to eradicate all ideological and behavioral inconsistencies inside the sociocultural "safe space". The main point here is not to create some kind of normative "boundary conditions" to make sure that society will keep its basic stability. The project is much more radical, maximalist and uncompromising: the social and political order must be purified from all misguided, destructive ideas. Even small deviations left to thrive and to spread would inevitably cumulate

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[19] *Hijrah From Hypocrisy To Sincerity*, «Dabiq», No. 3, p. 32.
[20] Umm Khalid al-Finlandiyyah, *How I Came to Islam*, «Dabiq», No. 15, p. 39.
[21] Abū 'Amr Al- Kinānī, *It's Either the Islamic State of the Flood*, «Dabiq», No. 2, p. 5.

and create the cracks in the wall built to separate the precious absolute truth from the sinful, heretic lies. Islam can exist only in its perfect, undistorted totality:

"Islam is a holistic religion that is to be approached from all sides, and defended from all sides. If any aspect of it is abandoned or ignored, the Shaytān and his soldiers will quickly fill the vacuum"[22].

As TMT authors observed, "our cultures also offer hope of symbolic immortality, the sense that we are part of *something greater* than ourselves that will continue long after we die"[23]. "Dabiq" authors repeat these statements: "This revival of the Khilāfah gave each individual Muslim a concrete and tangible entity to satisfy his natural desire for belonging to *something greater*. The satisfaction of this desire brought life back to the zeal latent in Muslims' hearts (…)"[24].

## Derogation of alternative worldviews

As the authors of TMT stated, "our first line of psychological defense against those whose conceptions of reality are different from our own is to derogate or belittle them, diminishing the threat their belief pose to our own. They are ignorant savages (…) or servants of the devil, or they're brain-washed by evil masters. Perhaps they are not even human"[25].

On the pages of "Dabiq" one can find many derogatory tropes and messages. The alternative worldviews are constructed as pathologically distorted versions of truth, utterly nonsensical and ignorant. They could be divided into three basic "subspecies". First, there are the "contaminated", "innovated" or "compromised" versions of Sunni Islam, professed by basically every Sunni Muslim group or individual not supportive of the Islamic State. The list of "heresies" and "deviations" is very long and discussed on the pages of "Dabiq" in great detail. Undermining the unity of religion and believers is defined as the single most dangerous transgression inside this "inner circle" of enemies. The strength of the revolutionary movement and its utopian dream lies in its numbers and in unconditional obedience to the single source of authority. Just like the proletarians in the Marxist tradition, Muslims of all countries

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[22] *Da'wah and Hisbah in the Islamic State*, «Dabiq», No. 3, p. 16.

[23] J. Greenberg et al., *The Worm…*, ch. 7, par. 25.

[24] *The Extinction of the* Grayzone, «Dabiq», No. 7, p. 57. See also: Abul-Harith ath-Thaghri, *Contemplate the Creation*, «Dabiq», No. 15, pp. 12–13.

[25] J. Greenberg et al., *The Worm…*, ch. 7, par. 15.

must stand united[26]. Islam can prevail only under one leader, one flag and one creed[27]. The demonstrations of unity are supposed to work as a self-fulfilled prophecy, leading to further political mobilization and expansion. As the authors of TMT stated, "cultural worldviews gain strength in numbers. For beliefs to serve as effective bulwarks against existential terror, people must be absolute certain of their validity. However, most of the core beliefs we depend on for psychological security are based on faith rather than fact; they cannot be unambiguously proven. Consequently, the more people who share our beliefs, the more sure we feel that they are correct"[28].

The single most vilified group inside this inner, Sunni circle of enemies to the Islamic State (aside of al Qaeda and its allies) is the Muslim Brotherhood[29]. The other derogated enemy are "the imams of kufr", the evil scholars, who are cynically corrupting religion in the interest of their own and their sinister masters[30].

The second group – the "middle circle of the enemies" – derogated in the Islamic State's propaganda are defined as apostates, especially the Shia. They are constructed as a force fundamentally hostile to Islam, allied with the Jews and the West. Their promised Messiah (*Mahdi*) is presented as the Antichrist (*Dajjal*) and their intentions, behaviors and values are consistently demonized in "Dabiq"[31].

The West ("the Crusaders") and its un-Islamic allies represent the "outer circle" of enemies. There are two main targets for derogatory rhetoric here: Christianity and morally corrupted and intellectually bankrupt "modernity", understood as contemporary Western civilization in general. Christianity is deconstructed as an offensively distorted version of the true religion, full of outrageous inconsistencies and nonsense[32]. Modernity and western ideas are described as "unnatural", depraved and destructive:

"Since the days of the so-called French Revolution in the West and thereafter the October Revolution in the East, the Christian lands of

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[26] *The Evil of Division and Taqlid*, «Dabiq», No. 11, pp. 10–14.

[27] Compare this to the slogan of Italian Fascists: *Credere, obbedire, combattere* (Believe, obey, fight) and to the German Nazis slogan: *Ein Volk, ein Reich, ein Führer* (One people, one state, one leader).

[28] J. Greenberg et al., *The Worm…*, ch. 7, par. 22.

[29] *The Murtadd Brotherhood*, «Dabiq», No. 14, pp. 28–43.

[30] *Kill the Imams of Kufr in the West…*, p. 13.

[31] *The Rafidah from Ibn Saba' to the Dajjal*, «Dabiq», No. 13, p. 37.

[32] *Break the Cross*, «Dabiq», No. 15, pp. 46–63.

disbelief have been generally ruled by philosophies at all-out war with the fitrah (inborn human nature). The teachings of Darwin, Marx, Nietzsche, Durkheim, Weber, and Freud made their way into most Western societies through educational systems and media industries designed to produce generations void of any traces of the fitrah. Children – and even adults – were taught that man's creation was the result of pure chaos, that history was the result of conflicts merely over material resources, that religion was the fabrication of simpleminded men, that the family social unit was adopted merely out of convenience, and that sexual intercourse was the ultimate reason behind man's decisions and actions. (…) The deviance carried on until the so-called "Brave New World" of America and Western Europe began legalizing marijuana, bestiality, transgenderism, sodomy, pornography, feminism, and other evils (…)"[33].

Finally, there is an atheism, portrayed as internally contradictory, unnatural and utterly ridiculous[34].

## Assimilation, demonization and destruction

Cultural assimilation is another – strongly present in Islamic State's discourse – tool of cultural worldviews trying to preserve their integrity and to keep their terror management ability intact. Again, it is fully compatible with the TMT:

"Besides denigrating those who are different, we can show these ignorant, misguided, or sinful people the light, thereby assimilating them into our worldview. What better proof of the validity of our view of the world that for others to come around to our way of thinking?"[35].

There is indeed great pressure on the idea of conversion in the Islamic State narrative. On the pages of "Dabiq" one can find many calls to repent and to change, presented as a sort of "last chance" before God, and his representatives on Earth are going to use more drastic measures to correct the unacceptable situation of human disunity[36].

Another example of the Islamic State's cultural assimilation efforts may be found in the article about religious conversion. The structure of the text is strictly compatible with the findings of religious conversion

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[33] *The Fitrah of Mankind and the Near Extinction of the Western Woman*, «Dabiq», No. 15, p. 20.
[34] Abul-Harith ath-Thaghri, *Contemplate the Creation*, «Dabiq», No. 15, pp. 8–9.
[35] J. Greenberg et al., *The Worm…*, Ch. 7, par. 18.
[36] *Contemplate the Creation…*, p. 13; *Break the Cross…*, p. 63.

researchers[37]. The convert precisely explains her gradual disillusionment towards the Western worldview and religion, her reasoning, emotions, the path to enlightenment and the enormous satisfaction and comfort after finding the absolute truth. Obviously, the main point of this text is to strengthen a self-esteem of the Muslim target audience and to sow doubt among the Western readers[38].

In the foreword of Issue 15, the same containing the article on conversion, the Islamic State, after perpetrating consecutive acts of terror, writes:

"… one would expect the cross-worshipers and democratic pagans of the West to (…) consider repentance by abandoning their infidelity and accepting Islam (…) And despite their wretched condition of ignorance and arrogance, we take this occasion (…) to call them once again to the religion of pure monotheism, truth, mercy, justice, and the sword. (…) the Crusaders can read into why (…) pagan Christians should break their crosses, why liberalist secularists should return to the fitrah (natural human disposition), and why skeptical atheists should recognize their Creator and submit to Him"[39].

As Pyszczynski, Solomon and Greenberg noted, "when derogation, assimilation, and accommodation are insufficient to secure a sense of equanimity, psychological push often comes to physical shove. "Might" becomes "right" in the service of eliminating the threatening other entirely, in part because our symbolic solutions to death are never psychologically sufficient (…) there is always lingering death anxiety that humans project onto other groups of people whom they designate as evil that must be destroyed"[40].

"We are good and pure and right and made in God's image with his countenance shining upon us. They are the problem, and the solution is clear: derogate, dehumanize, demonize, destroy. Eradicate the evil-doers; purify the world; prove that God is on your side; make life on earth as it is in heaven"[41].

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[37] Conversion consists characteristic elements: context, crisis, quest, meeting the advocate (teacher), relation building and strengthening the bonds inside a new group and, finally, a commitment that marks the end of the process. L. R. Rambo, *Understanding Religious Conversion*, Yale University Press 1993.

[38] Umm Khalid al-Finlandiyyah, *How I…*, p. 39.

[39] *Foreword*, «Dabiq», No. 15, p. 4.

[40] J. Greenberg et al., *The Worm…*, ch. 7, par. 32.

[41] Ibidem, par. 35.

There are great many calls, praises and explanations promoting violence against the enemies of truth (constructed as unambiguously evil[42]) on the pages of "Dabiq"[43]. It must be admitted that violence has many instrumental and expressive functions but destroying the enemies of God is a necessary precondition to eradicating all evil, thus it is presented as a sacred duty and the main responsibility of true believers. Most importantly, religion itself is constructed as a fundamentally violent phenomenon:

"Allah has revealed Islam to be the religion of the sword, and the evidence for this is so profuse that only a zindīq (heretic) would argue otherwise"[44].

Then, in the crucial article under a forthright title, a detailed and precise explanation of hatred and violence toward the rivalling worldviews, again fully consistent with TMT assumptions, is found:

"*We hate you, first and foremost, because you are disbelievers* (…) Furthermore, just as your disbelief is the primary reason we hate you, your disbelief is the primary reason we fight you, as we have been commanded to fight the disbelievers until they submit to the authority of Islam (…) So in the end, you cannot bring an indefinite halt to our war against you (…).

In the case of the atheist fringe, *we hate you and wage war against you because you disbelieve in the existence of your Lord and Creator* (…)"[45].

It is critically important to note that the main problem defined by the Islamic State here is the very *existence* of "the other", and not – as in pre-9/11 official Al-Qaeda statements – its *behavior* (which is necessary consequence of its essential evilness[46]). In accordance with TMT, the sheer presence of an alternative worldview is perceived as a highly

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[42] It is worthy to note that demonization is very literal here: the enemies are presented as the allies and servants of the Satan himself (*Kill the Imams of Kufr in the West*, «Dabiq», No. 14, pp. 12–13).

[43] See for instance: *Kill The Imams of Kufr*, «Dabiq», No. 13, p. 8; *The Rafidah from Ibn Saba' to the Dajjal…*, p. 42, *Kill the Imams of Kufr in the West…*, p. 9, 17; *Words of Sincere Advice From an American Convert in the Islamic State To the Former Christian Who Accepted Islam*, «Dabiq», No. 15, p. 29.

[44] *Islam is the Religion of the Sword, Not Pacifism…*, p. 20.

[45] *Why We Hate You & Why We Fight You*, «Dabiq», No. 15, pp. 31–32.

[46] "…I say to them, you are the ones who willingly choose to live like a sheep in a land of wolves, so don't blame the wolf for coming to snatch his prey!" (*O you who have believed protect yourself and your families from fire*, «Dabiq», No. 12, p. 35).

offensive provocation constituting an existential threat[47]. The notorious "behavioral problem" is non-coincidentally enumerated in the last position of the list of grievances[48].

The fragment below is probably the most striking evidence that the narrative of the Islamic State narrative is compatible with TMT's fundamental observations:

"What's important to understand here is that although some might argue that your foreign policies are the extent of what drives our hatred, this particular reason for hating you is secondary, hence the reason we addressed it at the end of the above list. The fact is, even if you were to stop bombing us, imprisoning us, torturing us, vilifying us, and usurping our lands, we would continue to hate you because *our primary reason for hating you will not cease to exist until you embrace Islam*"[49].

It is important to note that, from a functional point of view (the need to destroy "the other" who constitute as a threat to universal equanimity), a compelling alternative to physical destruction of the living, breathing "vehicles" of "deviant" worldviews is the destruction of their identity, which also ends cognitive dissonance, making terror management a hard and complicated task. A full cultural assimilation of the enemy could be in fact an even more acceptable solution as a useful feedback for strengthening the foundations of the worldview accordingly to the aforementioned observation that the more people who share beliefs, the more sure they feel that they are correct:

"*We fight you in order to bring you out from the darkness of disbelief and into the light of Islam*, and to liberate you from the constraints of living for the sake of the worldly life alone so that you may enjoy both the blessings of the worldly life and the bliss of the Hereafter"[50].

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[47] "The essence of the terror management view of ethnopolitical violence is that *the mere existence of those who are different poses a threat to the individual's faith in the absolute validity and correctness of his or her own perspective on reality*. This threat undermines the protection against deep existential fears that our worldviews provide. Derogating different others, working to convert them to one's own worldview, and in some cases doing battle to eliminate them from the face of the earth and thus help create a more perfect world can thus become a heroic, self-esteem–enhancing, and salvation-assuring virtuous activity that adds further protection to the defensive shield that we all need to survive in a world where the only real certainly is our inevitable demise". T. Pyszczynski et al., *In the Wake of 9/11. The Psychology of Terrorism*, American Psychological Association 2003, Ch. 7, par. 36.

[48] *Why We Hate You & Why We Fight You…*, p. 32.

[49] Ibidem, p. 33.

[50] Ibidem.

There is no doubt that the mission here is to save one's own world-view from the corrosive exposure to any alternative terror management systems. Only after achieving this task could peace of mind be ensured[51].

The idea of fighting the "unbelievers" until their total eradication or assimilation is not often expressed with such sincerity, brutality and bluntness as in the words of the Islamic State's propaganda platform[52].

## Reconstructing the meaning of death:
## a martyrdom's paradoxical power

Since reminders of death increase our tendency to cling to our world-views one may add to this that people who boost their self-esteem and establish a sense of meaning using apocalyptic, violent religious narra-tives are often predisposed and determined to demonstrate bravery in a face of a deadly threat by seeking a dramatic "predatory" martyrdom[53]. People who believe in the crucial importance of obeying God's will and who measure themselves by their achievements as soldiers of God would not only engage in extremely risky behaviors but could even actively seek death to prove their unshakable certainty that death is not a real thing. Since deeds are more persuasive than words, the act of martyrdom is treated as an ultimate argument in this kind of discourse. This particular kind of suicidal behavior could be perceived as a specific kind of "costly signaling"[54]. It is an internally normalized mean of communication with

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[51] *Break the Cross…*, p. 63.

[52] *By the Sword*, «Dabiq», No. 15, p. 80.

[53] On the "predatory martyrs" see: H. Barlow, *Dead for Good: Martyrdom and the Rise of the Suicide Bomber*, Paradigm Publishers 2007.

[54] Social signaling approach to the religious behavior is not a new one. In fact, as Connor Wood noticed, signaling theories have gained prominence in the anthropological, cogni-tive, and evolutionary studies of religion over the past two decades as an explanation for the popularity of strict religious denominations and the demographic decline of more liberal ones (C. Wood, *Ritual well-being: toward a social signaling model of religion and mental health*, «Religion, Brain and Behavior» 2016, 7 (3), p. 230). Signaling theory has an inter-est mainly in honest (hard-to-fake) signals (D. L. Hall, J. P. Gonzales, *Religious group identity and costly signaling*, «Religion, Brain and Behavior» 2016, 7 (3), pp. 246–248. The proponents of this model claim that rituals and nonverbal signals communicate religious identity more authentically than words could and that ritualized, nonverbal signals convey strategic information that can be genuinely relied on. See also: D. L. Hall et al., *Costly signaling increases trust, even across religious affiliations*, «Psychological Science» 2015, 26 (9), pp. 1368–1376; W. Irons, *Religion as a hard-to-fake sign of commitment* [in:]

rivalling cultural worldviews. Martyrdom should be also perceived as a way of strengthening in-group stability and consistency and as a psychologically comforting path to individual, symbolic and literal immortality[55]. This, again, is compatible with TMT:

"In certain instances, *suicide is part of a culturally approved script.* Devoutly religious people sometimes book their own passage from a transient earthly existence to a heavenly afterlife (…) Research verifies that death fears contribute to suicidal acts when they can be viewed as heroic efforts to serve one's god or country. (…) in a variety of contexts, *suicides provide a path to literal or symbolic immortality*"[56].

In the Islamic State's narrative death is almost omnipresent and of crucial importance, so there is no point to avoid thinking about it. In fact, mortality salience is used systematically to inspire expected attitudes and behaviors of its audiences. Thus, the other well-known strategy of terror management is implemented: the meaning of death is radically reconstructed as a merely portal leading to a much better (or much worse), "real", perpetual existence. Here one can see a radical changing of places inside the narrative: the cultural construct (Hereafter) is presented and perceived as a very real, vividly described place, while the material reality is presented and perceived as a kind of a dim illusion. Since reality of the Hereafter can't be empirically proved or disproved in the worldly life, the radical cultural and discursive transformation of the meaning of death, supported by the deeds of the martyrs ("witnesses") is probably the single most powerful tool of terror management available to humans. Martyrdom is constructed as the most certain and the fastest way to the "ultimate life", a kind of a triumphal arch, a shortcut to the best place that exists and is untouched by death, pain or any other inconveniences of mortal life. In the face of such glorious prospects, life on earth can and should be seen only as a rather tedious necessity, a relatively short time spent in a crowded waiting room or a prison. In fact, this kind of

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R. M. Nesse (ed.), *Vol. 3 in the Russell Sage Foundation series on trust. Evolution and the capacity for commitment*, Russell Sage Foundation 2001, pp. 290–309.

[55] Socially (and religiously) normalized suicidal behavior like "predatory martyrdom" as constructed by revolutionary Salafists is in fact treated inside such "normalizing" environronment as a case of an "altruistic suicide" as described by Émile Durkheim. On the other hand, it is supposed to bring great rewards not only to the community but to the martyr himself, which, without a doubt, greatly improves the attractiveness of such behavior.

[56] J. Greenberg et al., *The Worm…*, ch. 10, par. 63–64.

perception is constructed by the Islamic State as a foundation and explanation of the astonishing historical success of the Islamic community[57].

It is easy to see how such a worldview and a narrative performs its function of a powerful terror management solution if it is internalized properly and is placed inside a "safe place" purified of all doubters, deviants and unbelievers. In the same time, as TMT authors noticed, this kind of a solution is always a very fragile one and in need of constant validation, so enormous energy must be provided by its proponents to keep it working. A final cognitive closure requires an indisputable triumph.

## Conclusions: the radical terror management systems and their limitations

As Alex Schmid aptly observed[58], Salafist Jihadism "has managed to establish itself as the dominant ideology of rebellion in the early 21st century, just as Fascism and Communism had been the most violent ideologies of the 20th century". There is much, often impassionate, discussion and debate in scholarly literature and the media on the nature and causes of the persisting attractiveness of such "extreme" and violent propositions. The arguments are varied and rightfully so: complex phenomena can rarely be explained by reductive models. The political, cultural, economic and social factors should not be underestimated or ignored. Nevertheless, the striking compatibility between the particular worldview described by the narrative of the Islamic State and the assumptions of the TMT should be carefully reflected upon. One of the most important sources of the attractiveness and vitality of the Salafi Jihadi ideology is indeed its great efficiency at buffering existential anxiety. Its particular variants should be seen, among other things, as living, constantly evolving[59], psychologically efficient radical terror management systems

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[57] *Kill the Imams of Kufr in the West…*, p. 12.

[58] A. Schmid, *Public Opinion Survey Data to Measure Sympathy and Support for Islamic Terrorism: A Look at the Muslim Opinions on Al Qaeda and IS*, International Centre for Counter-Terrorism, Research Paper, February 2017, https://icct.nl/wp-content/uploads/2017/02/ICCT-Schmid-Muslim-Opinion-Polls-Jan2017-1.pdf (22.01.2022).

[59] It should be noted that, according to TMT, the evolution of the worldviews toward increasingly efficient "terror management devices" is not limited to some particular ideology, culture or historical period but is a universal adaptive mechanism working throughout the history of our species (J. Greenberg et al., *The Worm…*, ch. 4, par. 17). However, we should bear in mind that particular decisions and behaviors of the various

(devices). It is not so much a conscious design but rather a by-product of an ideological evolution, an epiphenomenon of a primal human motivation and aim, an effect of the complex adaptive processes working in the background of human societies and leading to the selection of more efficient terror management tools and systems at the expense of the less capable. The worldview and the narrative of the Islamic State is so far a culmination of this evolution under the pressure of GWOT implications: the most radical, uncompromising and coherent offer in comparison to the existing alternatives available on the contemporary "market of ideologies". The 70 "narrative motives" isolated by scholars[60] from texts published in "Dabiq" show that most of them are directly correlated with TMT assumptions and should be treated as functional elements inside its terror management toolbox. It should be noted that "Dabiq" exposed and discussed virtually every theme considered by the TMT authors as fundamental to their model.

Particular themes and motives are interconnected and mutually reinforced inside a general feedback loop. There is no place for confusing, anxiety-inducing indeterminism, chaos or doubt. All evils are temporary and will ultimately be defeated, all crimes will be punished and all noble deeds rewarded. The world is a simple place that can be easily explained and understood by the average human mind. Symbolic and individual immortality are directly connected and supportive to each other. Humans could and should be the significant contributors to the meaningful world. Inside the "great scheme of things" there is a place for everyone who can observe the easy-to-absorb rules, fully compatible with divinely designed human nature. The "in-group" norms, values, institutions and general way of life have the best possible certificate, being firmly and safely rooted in God's will and acceptance. All intellectual or behavioral disunity must be eradicated to bring universal, psychological comfort and salvation to all human beings. An ideal, peaceful and harmonious society is within hand's reach. Hatred toward "the other" is not only justified, but also just. Violence is not only necessary, but also noble. War is not only a question of survival, but also a vital part of God's plan. All believers are comfortably put inside the permanent,

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actors can strengthen the perception of dread and existential danger by some groups and thus instigate radicalization of its worldviews and violent reactions.

[60] J. Droogan, S. Peattie, *Mapping the thematic landscape of Dabiq magazine*, «Australian Journal of International Affairs» 2017, 76 (6), pp. 591–620.

unquestionable win-win situation: they can win either militarily and politically or spiritually.

To perform its functions this kind of a narrative must be rooted in sociopolitical reality to be perceived as "more true than truth" and to be able to fulfill every crucial (also conflicted) needs of the "receivers" and in the same time to support the interests of the "senders". The Islamic State's worldview should be seen as a byproduct of the so called global war on terror: a psychologically efficient solution to the terror management problem. The coherency of this construct seems to be "rock-solid": absolute, infallible and unfalsifiable. There seem to be answers to any question and remedies to any doubts. However, at the same time, there are "comforting paradoxes" designed to reinforce its efficiency – to be free is to accept only "right" authorities and "right" conclusions (freedom is the appreciation of the necessity); everyone can be special; history is predetermined, but individuals can meaningfully influence the fate of the cosmic war; and the most altruistic sacrifice (martyrdom) brings the most precious reward. The foundation of the attractiveness of the Islamic State is in its inviting the audience to the exclusive (but at the same time massive and inclusive) circle of the protagonists of the epic, grandiose tale, a story exciting and dangerous but with an assured successful conclusion. It is in fact a kind of a contract. The rewards of the receiver are many and the most significant ones; they are a remedy for an identity crisis and alienation, a high-esteem boost being the result of the radical change of status ("from zero to hero"). They provide a sense of value, meaning, brotherhood, fulfillment and purpose resulting in peace of mind and equanimity. The price seems to be reasonable: a suspension of disbelief and the transformation of views, attitudes, intentions and behaviors accordingly to this "rock-solid" worldview and often death for a cause (which, however, is not a death at all).

The reasonable question should be posed here: if "radical" worldviews are more efficient in the crucial task of terror management than more moderate ones, why are the former not capable of dominating and superseding the latter? The answer is obviously complex, but one of the most important factors is the contradiction between psychological and strategical efficiency. From the TMT point of view, the most "efficient" worldviews may be the most unambiguous and thus uncompromising. Those kind of constructs, however, are by their nature prone to potentially dangerous misperceptions. Since they need to build a radically coherent version of reality, all observable inconsistencies must be ignored, reinterpreted and reconstructed or repressed. Complex reality

with all its ambiguities, uncertainties and unknowns must be compressed and reduced inside the simplified, limited, dogmatic frame of reference.

It could be assumed that while cultural worldviews under the pressure of adverse circumstances evolve towards more strict, "radical" terror management devices, they become more and more psychologically efficient, which should make them more attractive and popular, strengthening their mobilization capabilities and thus securing more resources at their disposal. This in turn should make it possible to destroy or assimilate their less capable rivals. However, the very same characteristics that makes them efficient psychologically expose them to the danger of strategic inefficiency. Thus the very function (and the source of initial success) of this kind of "psychologically perfect" TMT devices, designed more or less consciously to reduce existential anxiety, is carrying the seeds of their own demise.

The fundamental, universal elements of a strategy are the instrumental use of violence, deception and coalition building[61]. It can be a very hard task, for instance, to build coalitions while keeping identity founded on the uncompromising drive to destroy all alternative worldviews. Because the narrative of the dogmatic system is by definition infallible, the admitting of making errors and the adaptation to the changing parameters of the strategic environment could become very challenging. Therefore, the strategic usefulness of the radical worldviews is usually limited unless the circumstances are particularly favorable. Growing tension between strategic need of flexibility in a demanding security environment and the doctrinal need of rigorism in an equally demanding "socio-psychological environment" usually leads to serious complications. In time, dogmatic TMT devices must either be destroyed as they are unable to negotiate their worldviews with the pressures of reality or learn to compromise in the name of survival and thus partially lose its psychological efficiency, which is their main source of attractiveness and legitimacy.

Fictions constructed by humans to save them from existential dread are indeed very powerful devices, but some of the parameters of reality existing outside them limit even their transformative potential. It seems that the blind corner of the ideological evolution may be similar to the biological one. The thicker the "armor against reality" becomes, the harder is the task of keeping the mobility, maneuverability and, above all, of keeping the image of reality undistorted enough to survive. Cutting

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[61]  L. Freedman, *Strategy. A History*, Oxford University Press 2013, p. 3.

the psychologically discomforting and socially disturbing signals from the environment equals to cutting the connections between perception and reality, thereby creating an informational vacuum that is filled with convenient but deadly fantasies. The radical terror management devices will keep appearing and evolving since they clearly offer answers to the powerful human need. At the same time, they will keep falling either because of the growing gap between real and psychological reality[62] or as an effect of disillusion resulting in decomposition and transformation to the less dogmatic – and thus not so psychologically attractive – versions of their former selves. It seems that the most radical terror management devices" could not survive for a long time unless in utter isolation or a particularly advantageous environment, like this created as a consequence of a response to 9/11. Ultimately, they either must sacrifice their survivability on the altar of doctrinal purity or sacrifice their doctrinal purity on the altar of survivability. Both cases negate their success, leaving space to the more open systems to grow and expand, but in the same time opening a vacuum to be filled by newer variants of the uncompromising and strictly Manichean solutions.

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[62] There are three types of misperceptions: cognizance gap, relevance gap and evaluation gap. Moreover, "the process of adjustment of perceptual performance is described in terms of a three-sided typology: adaptation, non-adaptation and mal-adaptation" (Y. Vertzberger, *Misperception in international politics: A typological framework of analysis*, «Empirical and Theoretical Research in International Relations» 1982, 9 (3), p. 207 and 225). Radical terror management devices by their nature seem to be especially vulnerable to mal-adaptation and all types of misperceptions.

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