The psychology of extreme behaviour
(STRATFOR Global Affairs Contribution)

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Analysis

STRATFOR opened the New Year with the introduction of three new columnists, including myself, that were playfully named `the three tenors'. Now that each has had his overture, it seems that this label should be adjusted somewhat to reflect the different levels from which we work in concert with each other to analyse events in the world. Jay, the *lyric tenor*, phrases the themes of the different movements while Ian, the *counter-tenor*, hits the high Cs from his 30,000-foot vantage point. I will hold a more *basso continuo*, strumming and plucking selected expressions from the 3 billion base pairs that make up the strands of the human genome.

In my previous article, I started to set up an alternative stage from which to analyse what drives people to the extreme. In this article, I will use the Islamic State as my primary case study to explore how we figure out what behaviour is abnormal and how such behaviour might naturally develop from "normal" human traits. Extreme behaviour, if we exclude outright psychiatric conditions, is a consequence of extreme living conditions, and from my point of view, it is not a surprise that some people exhibit extreme behaviour; but it is a surprise that so few of us do. The Well-known primatologist, Sarah Blaffer Hrdy, once observed how well-behaved (anthropologically speaking) cranky airplane passengers really are, even on long flights. Chimpanzees in the same conditions would destroy the aircraft, and several of each other long before take-off.

The relativity of 'Extreme'

When analysing human behaviour on the global stage, statistics can provide some insight by allowing us to classify and correlate factors across time, geography, and a range of other dimensions; but if the range of data in the dimension being studied is limited in some way, then the results will be skewed and unfit for general application.

Cultural dissimilarity is one such dimension which suffers from these limitations when studied. To measure cultural dissimilarity properly, one would need to estimate the intensity of emotional tension between self-proclaimed groups, such as the Israelis and Palestinians. If each group's identity is determined by the collection of its members' perceptions of where they stand in relation to "others," or people outside the group, then what would be the basic mechanism that could determine where groups stand in relation to each other? Most of us feel fairly normal, most of the time. We judge our own behaviour against a norm which we each subconsciously calculate by averaging out the behaviours that we have become aware of, both in our own realities and in the stories told to us. Extremists, then, are just outliers in a range of conceivable behaviours based around our own estimation of what is "*normal,*" so in other words, *extremism* is in the eye of the beholder. Though most people would label the Islamic State as an extremist group, its members probably consider themselves much closer to the norm, and would be likely to reciprocate the classification against those who labelled them in the first place.

So what happens to our estimation of normalcy if our field of view is suddenly broadened? Imagine, for a moment, what the effect would be if the performance of 2014 Eurovision Song Contest winner, Conchita Wurst, and who is a bearded drag-queen, was broadcast to the Taliban elders in the mountains of Afghanistan. Even the European bourgeois public held its breath during the show; so it would not be difficult to guess the Taliban's response. The effects of such a culture shock would be felt on both sides, and each society would see a new "*extreme*" emerge on its scale of normalcy. The digital highways that mankind has created have warped the geography of the world, and cultures that historically arose continents apart have been abruptly juxtaposed in a way that has raised emotions high.

Different cultures have been in contact with each other before, particularly along the age-old trade routes. Even recent history has examples of sudden, rather massive collisions of diverse societies, such as the discovery of the *New World* or the Japanese and US militaries' seizure of the Pacific

islands during World War II. When these encounters happen, each side's adverse reaction to the other follows a classic inverse U-curve: On one side, there is little reaction if one party is too weak to resist the second; on the other side, there is also little reaction when the weaker party is wooed with worldly comforts. The trouble lies between these two extremes, where the intensity and outcome of the conflict resulting from the encounter is determined by the classic drivers such as geography, history and economics.

Still, cultural juxtapositions in the absence of a direct geographic outlet are relatively new. The meeting of worlds would not have a serious impact if the cultures involved were separated by large distances that were difficult to traverse. The angst felt today, exists because it only takes a flight or two to turn a threat that was previously confined to a videotape, into a reality. It is possible that this tension could be lessened by the presence of a "*cultural bridge*" of sorts, or a society that serves as a middle link between the two clashing civilisations. Westernised Amazon natives, for example, often act as intermediaries between Westerners and other native tribes, but what culture could bridge the gap between, say, the Austrian *nouveau kitsch* and born-again *Deobandi Pashtun* tribesmen?

We can see, then, that cultural dissimilarity like other sociological parameters can behave haphazardly at times. A sudden exposure to other cultures easily could render any model which is built on previous circumstances, totally useless in terms of extending its implications to future events. So although such variables might very well be the most relevant to studying many of the sociological issues we face today, they are often understudied. Physical measures such as population density and energy consumption are usually much more stable, and therefore are often considered far more preferable to work with.

The absolute `Extreme'

Extremes can be found by comparing their position relative to other data points, but there is also a more absolute vantage point that can help identify the bounds of certain behavioural parameters and provide at least the beginning of a depth of vision. These limits are determined by the degree of elasticity that human traits display in order to cope with stress. Most human traits have compensated already for the extreme mismatch between mankind's original evolutionary environment and his present living conditions. Extremists, then, are the outliers within a range that is already extreme in the absolute sense.

The unique power of the principles of human anthropology is that it compresses millions of years of evolution into psychosocial parameters which are inherently relevant to the study of modern man. It is because these principles also rest on relatively concrete, measurable behaviours, that they are more or less ready for use by academics and practitioners alike. Unfortunately, few sociologists venture beyond the traditional and easier-to-measure demographic data, meaning that the body of evidence to draw upon is still scant. Take, for instance, the range of bonding experiences which a person may have before adulthood. On one end of the spectrum, a child in a band of extant hunter-gatherers is parented by about a dozen adults, and is consequently programmed to bond with many fathers and mothers at the same time. All of these social parents treat the child as well as they would their own, to the point that the child may not realise that only one of the women in its group is its biological mother until many years later. On the other end of the spectrum, a child is raised in a minimally serviced institution, and thus experiences little to no bonding with a caring elder. These scenarios serve as endpoints on an absolute range in human nature which is universally applicable. For example, this particular range would be useful in studying second-generation Turkish and Moroccan immigrants in some of Europe's inner cities, where a substantial difference exists in the proportion of youths that lose their deference toward their elders, a loss that is correlated with delinquency. While information on childhood bonding experiences would not be easy to capture, my point is that a *best-effort* estimate of a highly relevant parameter goes a lot further than an easily obtained measure that is only tangentially related to the issue at hand.

Once an absolute scale is applied to a given human trait, we can gain further depth in our interpretation of a person's behaviour by comparing that scale to measurements of relative extremity for the same trait. Absolute values in human behaviour show us the range of change which actually is conceivable, and thus help us work out how far specific actions are from mankind's biological limits.

The `True-Believer' Syndrome re-defined

Let us apply these concepts to the formation of a sect. Although there are several definitions and classifications of sects, I will concentrate on a particular pathological type that experiences *true-believer syndrome*, or the belief in a given idea or event, despite proof to the contrary. As a phenomenon, the Islamic State exhibits many of the hallmarks of this syndrome. If we can understand better the human traits elasticity in coping with stress, then we can concentrate our efforts to counter the movement on methods which are effective, and so help officials to move beyond the naïve emergency de-radicalisation programmes which seem to be sprouting up everywhere. According to a group of psychologists led by Professor Matthew J. Sharps, four psychological factors explain the true believer's ability to keep reality from getting in the way of beliefs, and all of which can be broken down into deeper underlying human traits:

- The first psychological factor is the tendency to *disconnect* what is happening in the *immediate environment* from the belief of having witnessed a highly improbable event. (Stories of alien abduction come to mind.) People under stress, commonly feel a sense of malaise, which is also associated with man's natural response to potential danger, but because danger lies in the rare and unexpected event rather than the daily routine, then people will often ignore their surrounding environments when they encounter an aberration. Some Islamic State converts, for example, have told tales reminiscent of St. Paul's fall from a horse, and the subsequent vision of the Lord.
- The second factor is the *inclination to process* an event as a *gestalt*, or an organised whole in its own right, rather than as a collection of its individual features. Scholars have noted that the majority of Western Islamic State converts did not follow Islamic religious education, and in fact ignore several of the religion's foundational pillars. This disconnect does not create any psychological discomfort, although, because these converts experience their version of Islam as a "*whole*" of impressions and ceremony, rather than as a collection of individual tenets which must be adhered to.
- The third factor is *cognitive dissonance*, or the unease a person feels when he or she holds two conflicting ideas at the same time. The stress of this mental rivalry forces the individual to make a choice, picking on only the idea which he or she is most invested in. This natural ability allowed early hunter-gatherers to weed out and ignore extraneous events in their daily routines; today, it allows young Islamic State recruits to dismiss any information that causes them to question their decision to leave home in the first place and to fight in a faraway land.
- Finally, human minds are gifted with a mental shortcut known as the *availability heuristic*. When making choices, a person will rely heavily on the example that most quickly comes to mind to reach a final decision and this often means that more recent events which are easier to remember, have an over-reaching influence on decision-making. Thousands of years ago, the availability heuristic would have focused a hunter-gatherer's attention on his immediate surroundings in the here and now. More recently, it would have been expressed in a young jihadist's mind as the pride felt while parading through a conquered city, and so quelling any earlier doubts about the outcome of the fight.

Applying principles to policy

How can we make use of the true-believer syndrome in today's efforts against terrorism? In the aftermath of the attacks in France and Belgium, my own home, politicians were quick to latch onto drastic counter-measures, including the implementation of de-radicalisation programmes. For example, one programme established emergency units of teachers and school psychologists who would intervene immediately if a student began showing signs of "*radical behaviour*" in school; but trying to talk sense into Islamic State sympathisers while at the same time increasing the police and military presence in the streets, does not address the core of the problem. A more effective solution might be to target the causes of the *true-believer syndrome* that young Islamic State recruits may be suffering from. Social interventions are not easy, as any student of STRATFOR's realist perspective knows well; so then all the more reason to take into account the converts investments in their Islamic State allegiance, factual awareness of group beliefs, and the level of dissociation from reality, as well as to identify and support healthy adult role models within the Muslim community.

Let me close by pointing out the irony in this discussion. The traits underlying the *true-believer syndrome* and extreme behaviour more generally, exist in all human beings. Those who exhibit signs of the syndrome and harm themselves or others represent an extreme combination of the already extreme ranges which present today in these human traits.

The Islamic State, while perhaps the most talked-about example in today's media, is by no means the only one. These traits are visible in the politicians aiming to address the Islamic State as well; after all, they are humans, too. Some have difficulty separating fact from fiction; others will push grand ideas while ignoring the details which determine success or failure; there are still others who will dismiss readily any information which contradicts their voters beliefs; and perhaps even more damning, many react instinctively to today's crisis, while forgetting even the lessons of recent past. It is only a matter of proportion that separates their behaviour from that of a *true believer*.