ISRAEL & THE MIDDLE EAST

Sadomasochism and the Jihadi Death Cult

A psychoanalytic look at why people throw themselves into campaigns of murder and suicide

BY NANCY HARTEVELT KOBRIN

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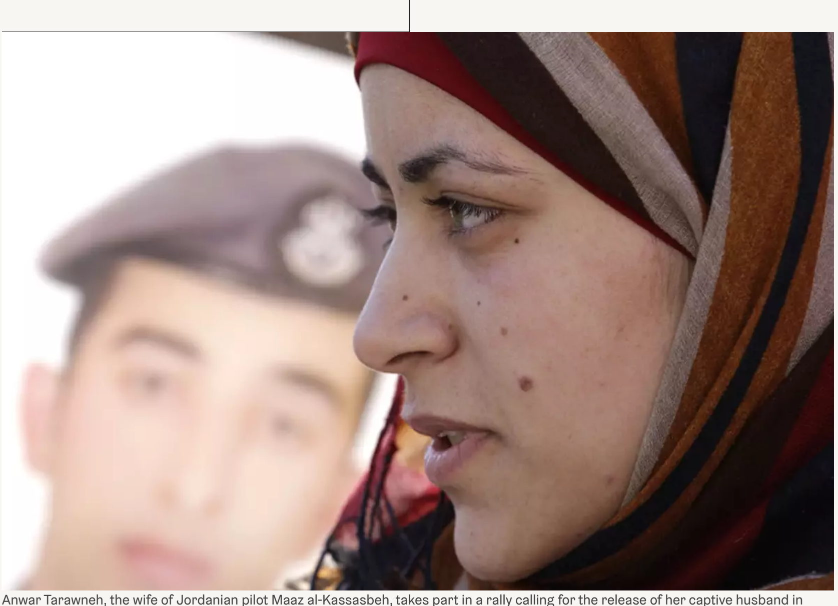

Anwar Tarawneh, the wife of Jordanian pilot Maaz al-Kassasbeh, takes part in a rally calling for the release of her captive husband in Amman on Feb. 3, 2015.(Khalil Mazraawi/AFP/Getty Images)

Paul Berman's recent essay in Tablet magazine "Why Is the Islamist Death Cult So Appealing?" is a wonderful piece on the history of Islamist ideas, but Berman does not really answer the question that he poses in his first line: "Why do people who are not clinically crazy throw themselves into campaigns of murder and suicide?" Berman's conclusion is that "apocalyptic dreams, the cult of hatred and murder and yearning for death" born of unhappiness is what motivates Islamist terrorists, and further that "eschatological rebellion against everyday morality satisfies them." But is that why they do it? Is that what motivates men in hoods to publicly decapitate an individual with a knife, or pose smiling with the severed head of a woman, or put bullets into the heads of hundreds of captives and toss them into the river, or most recently throw a prisoner into a cage and light him on fire? Berman addresses the ideological part of the problem, but buried deeper is the psychological pull of sadomasochism—the thrill of violence, power, and control that comes from inflicting pain on others. This is the unspoken driver of the appeal of the Islamic State and similar groups.

Although we cannot know what goes on inside anyone's head, the tools of psychoanalysis offer some tantalizing, and I believe promising, angles of interpretation. To be fair, military strategists, national security specialists, criminal-justice professionals and journalists are not trained to observe these men as if they were patients. They may have read the works of Islamists like Sayyid Qutb and Hassan al Banna, but they lack the diagnostic skills needed to access the deeper unconscious levels of psychology that are necessary for understanding the attraction of sadomasochism.

Indeed the denial of sadism by the specialists who usually comment on terrorism has ironically played into the hands of jihadis by permitting an identification with the aggressor. There are many people out there who, alas, like to watch torture videos of immolations and beheadings. We are even more reluctant to acknowledge that broad portions of the world's population are drawn into this sadism because they cannot recognize their own impulses.

The Islamic State communicates to us on the deepest level of perversity possible, tapping into our own terrors through projective identification. The most recent atrocity committed by ISIS in the case of the Jordanian pilot Lt. Mu'adh Al-Kasasbeh is instructive. Why fire? Why the cage? Clearly they wanted to create a modern-day video of a medieval spectacle to terrify us in order to further a strategic goal: to issue a summons to obey them or otherwise become the object of their rage. But to leave it at that will not help us to deconstruct what is happening symbolically. The terrorists themselves do not realize how revealingly transparent their aberrant behavior is; they have no capacity to look at their own behavior or to understand it psychologically.

Unconsciously and concretely, they have recreated their own group self-perception of being "caged in" emotionally and mentally because of the debilitation of growing up in a shame-honor culture: They realize that, in the eyes of the world, Islam has been shamed. Fire, too, in the context of psychoanalysis, has many aspects worth considering. It might express projected rage. It might also purify an obsession with feeling dirty, deeply linked to this shame, which is supported by a religious conviction that normal human needs are unclean. They must therefore find a scapegoat and then kill off the contaminated one, inviting us to watch voyeuristically.

But what of the Western converts who join the jihadi cults? What is the draw for them? It is nearly the same. From examining their childhoods, the majority are born into what I call shame-honor Western families—highly rigid and authoritarian or lacking any parental structure at all. And then there are the numerous jailhouse converts. Many criminals have a cognitive deficit, and some show signs of clinical sadomasochism. A sadist seeks power through control, manipulation, and forcing the other to submit. Intimacy comes only with violence. They feel, they bond, through violence: Burning the Jordanian pilot expressed the Islamic State's perverse sense of intimacy with its victim.

These jihadis then use fire to work through that which they don't understand. Since some jihadis have difficulty feeling emotion, they are obsessed with torturing the other in order to see feelings expressed on the agonized face of the other. Fire can also represent their rage and denial of mortality, though they claim to love death. While they may think martyrdom can lead to a certain kind of immortality, that is a delusion: The Islamist ideologies are merely a conduit through which to project their own rage and terror. This all involves sadism of the highest order.

It is important to underline the fact that many viewers enjoy this kind of perversion. Like Jean Baudrillard, the French intellectual who wrote that everyone had to rejoice at the sight of the twin towers collapsing, an unknown percentage of people see these horrendous videos and rejoice—which is why they are viewed so widely and make such effective propaganda for the jihadi cause. We underestimate their appeal. We do not want to think about it.

While it is obviously true that we cannot place every terrorist under intensive psychological investigation, we can nonetheless speculate on their behavior and the sources of this trauma. In my own research and descriptive analysis, corroborated by neuroscience findings, my theory is that terrorists may not fully develop empathy, an emotion acquired in the earliest years of life. Professor Aner Govrin at Bar Ilan University has written a fascinating essay in which he places moral development at the age of 1 and focuses on the importance of maternal attachment: The mother is most influential in shaping the baby's brain, which quadruples in size between the ages of 0 and 3, and is the repository of morality and knowledge. She is also the earliest cultural interpreter of shame and honor for her child.

It is profoundly mistaken, however, to believe that undervalued women who have been constant shock absorbers for male rage and abuse are able to attach in optimal ways when they have their own children. I refer to this elsewhere as "the maternal drama," which, along with sadomasochism and shame-honor, lies at the heart of Islamist terrorism. Why now does it produce such a harvest of violence? Mass communication and the Internet have exacerbated a deeper cultural problem.

The Iraqi child-psychiatrist Dr. Sami Timimi has written that in Arab Muslim culture the bond between mother and child is unseverable. One is never permitted to separate from the mother. This is a perversion, a misuse of the baby as an object. In an honor-shame culture one does not go through an individuation separation process known in psychological development as neotenization. This impedes maturity. The group identity is more important than the individual identity. Shame and revenge predominate.

It must be remembered that the father is also a symptom of the underlying problem in shame-honor environments as he, too, was once a baby boy experienced as an object of honor, not as an individual in his own right. Many experts on Arab Muslim culture get this point and emphasize the need for an authoritarian father-figure to keep the shame-honor tribes in line, but that just repeats the awful cycle of treating people like objects: ISIS immolated the Jordanian pilot, an object of their hatred, whereupon the King of Jordan retaliated by killing two terrorists and launching dozens of airstrikes to avenge the death, to great popular acclaim.

Yet I would argue that King Abdullah needs to use both the carrot and the stick. The stick is his revenge attacks on the Islamic State in order to reestablish honor in his kingdom. But at the same time he needs to begin to teach his people that the cycle of blood-letting has to stop in order to pull his people out of the morass of shame and its destructive culture through education and early-childhood development.

Arab culture needs to get over willfully spilling blood in order to cleanse honor. It is delusional, and it has profound consequences for us all. If we fail to consider the sadism of the jihadis and their early-childhood development, we will wind up in the cage that they have built for us. We do not need to share in their perversion. We know in the West that shame destroys a child, but we have failed to understand the ramifications of shame linked to sadism, which is shame's key instrument.

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Nancy Hartevelt Kobrin, a psychoanalyst, is author of The Banality of Suicide Terrorism: The Naked Truth About Islamic Suicide Bombing, Penetrating the Terrorist Psyche, *and* The Maternal Drama of the Chechen Jihadi. *She is a research fellow at the American Center for Democracy and is currently writing* Desperanto: A Conceptual Dictionary About How Terrorists Misuse Objects.

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