Media Persuasion in the Islamic State

By Neil Krishan Aggarwal. New York: Columbia University Press, 2019. 264 pp. $64.99.

Reviewed by   Elie G. Aoun, MD

Dr. Neil Aggarwal's *Media Persuasion in the Islamic State* is a thought-provoking book analyzing the role of multimedia publications by the Islamic State (IS) as an effective vector for the cultural messaging of the terrorist organization. The book demonstrates how media and text can be used as a tool in thinking about the interaction between culture and psychology. The author, a cultural psychiatrist and an assistant professor of clinical psychiatry at Columbia University, studied Arabic at the American University of Beirut and published two prior related books examining terrorism from a cultural psychiatry perspective: *Mental Health in the War on Terror: Culture, Science, and Statecraft* (2015) and *The Taliban's Virtual Emirate: The Culture and Psychology of an Online Militant Community* (2016).

The IS's infamous success in recruiting hundreds of militant jihadists who moved to Syrian and Iraqi territories from all over the world, including the United States, Canada, and several European countries, has been attributed, at least in part to its media messaging. The book applies qualitative academic rigor to delve into the psychological principles embedded in published text, videos, and images released by the IS. The author examines what makes these tools effective in enlisting sympathizers and promoting change in the cultural perception of the organization. This framework can be further used to understand better the mechanisms by which the IS successfully recruits European and American nationals into their ranks. The author coined the term "mediated disorder" as a representation of the phenomenon that includes both media and mediated effects.

As a mediated phenomenon, the use of multimedia resources manipulates cognitive and emotional processes, inciting violence and normalizing its existence.

Media Persuasion in the Islamic State utilizes the framework of the Outline for a Cultural Formulation (OCF) to evaluate psychology in cultural context as applied to the inception of the IS's cultural identity. These principles are thought to explain why and how this multimedia approach successfully promoted violence as a means of cultural preservation morally superior to personal preservation. The model's premise involves using targeted and highly controlled media representations of IS leaders and tenets to moderate the perception of psychosocial stressors. For the purposes of the book, the OCF framework is subdivided into four domains: cultural identity, cultural conceptualizations of stress and psychological stressors, clinical features of vulnerability and resilience, and cultural elements of the "patient–clinician relationship."

The book is divided into eight chapters, each sequentially following major points in the evolution of the organization and its predecessors, starting with al-Qaeda in Iraq and ending in the IS expansion into Syria under Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi. In every chapter, Aggarwal parallels his chronological evaluation of the organization with an in-depth analysis of sample IS publications illustrating various persuasive elements. Through his analysis of this representative selection of multimedia publications, the author successfully demonstrates how a given strategy was effective in promoting violence. The book's final chapter, "Toward a Science, Policy, and Practice of Militant Counter-Messaging," deviates from this structure to present a model for the involvement of psychiatrists in promoting counter-messaging to such acts of violence (albeit raising reservations to addressing violent extremist terrorism as a mental health concern rather than a law enforcement problem). Aggarwal sees the role of the psychiatrist as providing public health screenings that could help provide treatment to at-risk individuals rather than aid in law enforcement.

This book showcases how the media arm of the IS propagated violent thoughts, emotions, and behaviors using a parallel narrative structure and multistep arguments. These strategies modulated the affective appraisal of traditional models of violent terrorist acts, allowing IS followers to perceive such acts as desirable. In the publications, analyzed, Aggarwal identifies persuasion techniques embedded in IS media

publications, including drawing contrast, establishing reciprocity with the audience, using a likable person to deliver the message, invoking authority, and claiming the possibility of future scarcity. Specifically, he highlights the use of first person plural language (we/our) as an attempt to project a message of egalitarianism rather than the organizational hierarchy traditionally seen in militant organizations whereby leaders dictate to followers. Similarly, by using images and videos showing attractive, happy looking, smiling men carrying the organization's message, the IS reinforces group norms of violence as socially desirable.

One striking example involves Aggarwal's study of the concept of martyrdom in IS publications. The Muslim religion traditionally views suicide as prohibited and culturally unacceptable. This view posed a challenge to terrorist organization preceding the IS in their efforts to make suicide attacks culturally acceptable and to recruit suicide attackers. In contrast, the IS challenged that idea and presented IS fighters as "devoted actors of the will of God who sacrifice themselves to defend the group's cultural identity rather than maximize their personal safety and material gains" (p 16). They reframed the concept as a culturally and religiously desirable goal.

Aggarwal notes that the wide scale violence perpetrated in Syria and Iraq by the IS is promoted by IS leaders as acts of self-defense against a narrative of perceived Western aggression. IS followers acting violently on such messaging inappropriately perceive having a patriotic or otherwise protective intent. The author contrasts such acts of violence with military interventions lead by Western nations, where the official justification for the use of force is often global safety, justice, or achieving peace.

The author's conclusions carry significance for public policy and clinical practice. He finds that the interaction between environmental or cultural factors and violent acts of terrorism is dynamic rather than static and, as such, solutions should be carefully adapted to the dynamic cultural factors at play. Lawmakers seeking to implement effective and meaningful policies to protect against violent terrorism ought to pay special attention to the ways in which violence is perceived in a given culture. Further, terrorist groups like the IS can present a challenge for psychiatrists performing risk assessments and thinking about violent acts committed by IS followers. Environmental and contextual factors underlie the extent to which

one finds normalcy in cognitive, behavioral, and emotional processes. This book challenges the traditional methodology in risk assessment evaluations. It is a very valuable read to any forensic psychiatrist interested in better understanding the role of media in influencing cultural beliefs and modulating considerations in assessing risk in forensic evaluations. The themes reviewed can be used to draw parallels in thinking about the role of social media in shaping social and political beliefs.

Denying to the Grave: Why We Ignore the Facts That Will Save Us

Reviewed by Farah Tabaja, MD, and John Bonetti, DO

Denying to the Grave is an exploration of science denial that focuses on health, medicine, and the psychological and neurobiological mechanisms underlying how people make decisions that can affect their health. This book, written by public health specialist Sara Gorman and her psychiatrist father Jack Gorman, uses evidence from psychological research to describe the many factors that lead people to reject scientific data. The book also proposes seven guiding principles and six solutions to help sway people in the direction of accepting scientific evidence and rejecting the allure of "junk" science.

The authors use recurrent examples of so-called controversial scientific topics to serve as prototypical examples of science denial. These topics include the safety of vaccines, the risks associated with guns, the