

Dehumanisation in religious and sectarian violence: the case of Islamic State

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Abstract

It is often taken more or less for granted that perpetrators of mass killings and other acts of violent atrocity dehumanise their victims in order to justify killing them. Drawing on the past decade of developments in psychological theories of dehumanisation, and on representations and explanations of killing provided by Islamic State, this paper argues for a more complex understanding of the role of notions about humanity and inhumanity in the legitimisation of violence.

Keywords

Dehumanisation, Violence, Religion, Sectarianism, Islamic State, Ideology

Introduction

Dehumanisation, understood by Bandura (1996) as ‘divest[ing] people of human qualities or attribute[ing] bestial qualities to them’ such that they are ‘no longer viewed as persons with feelings, hopes and concerns but as subhuman objects’ is one of the most commonly cited psychological mechanisms used to explain mass killing and atrocious violence. Depending on how broadly the concept is understood, it is either integral to, or it is *the* fundamental ideational mechanism by which mass killing is to be explained.

In this article, I will seek to challenge our present understanding of the role of dehumanisation in mass killing by means of a two-part argument. First, as I will show, recent research into dehumanisation carried out largely within the realm of experimental psychology has made some extremely interesting discoveries which, so far, have barely been recognised by researchers working on political violence. Taken together, these discoveries have the potential to turn the conventional understanding of dehumanisation on its head.

Secondly, while dehumanisation seems to be conceived of by its theoretical proponents as universally applicable to situations of intercommunal killing, the empirical literature has tended to focus on rationalisations for killing in the context of inter-ethnic or colonial violence. In this paper, I will examine the role of ideas about humanity and inhumanity in justifying the violence carried out by ‘Islamic State’, a group which is, perhaps, *par excellence*, responsible for acts of intercommunal killing along sectarian and religious, rather than ethnic boundary lines. As I will argue, IS’s justifications for killing raise serious problems for the universality of dehumanisation as normally understood in the political violence literature, but can be fruitfully understood in terms of recent extensions of dehumanisation proposed by experimental psychology.

Theories of Dehumanisation

In attempts to explain how acts of atrocious violence and mass killing are psychologically possible for perpetrators, a common claim is that perpetrators act under the belief that their victims are not truly or fully human, in other words that they have psychologically 'dehumanised' them.

From this general notion, two senses, both current in the collective violence literature can be drawn out. One of these is broad and encompassing of other related mechanisms. The other is relatively narrow.

According to Herbert Kelman (1973):

To understand the process of dehumanization we must first ask what it means to perceive another person as fully human in the sense of being included in the moral compact that governs human relationships. I would propose that to perceive another as human we must accord him identity and community...To accord a person identity is to perceive him as an individual, independent and distinguishable from others, capable of making his own choices, and entitled to live his own life on the basis of his own goals and values. To accord a person community is to perceive him - along with one's self - as part of an interconnected network of individuals who care for each other, who recognise each other's individuality, and who respect each other's rights. These two features together constitute the basis for individual worth.

In this conception, dehumanization can be taken more or less as a synonym for 'moral disengagement', since the notion of 'humanness' and the notion of being part of a moral community are treated as inseparable. Indeed Savage (2013) argues that the term can be applied to all 'discursive strategies' [which serve to] 'den[y] that, in terms of the morality of the action, members of that group are worthy of the same treatment and consideration that would be afforded members of the in-group'. The word, he insists, can stand for or incorporate a variety of 'related or similar' terms including 'devaluation (Ervin Staub), moral exclusion (Staub and Susan Opatow), delegitimation (Daniel Bar Tal), depersonalisation (Henri Tajfel), social death (Orlando Patterson), demonization, infra-humanisation and so forth'.

Other scholars of collective violence seem, however, to understand the term in a somewhat narrower sense. For Albert Bandura (1996), dehumanization is *a* mechanism, not *the* mechanism by which moral disengagement is achieved. He understands it as a cognitive process which "divests people of human qualities or attributes bestial qualities to them. Once dehumanized, they are no longer viewed as persons with feelings, hopes and concerns but as subhuman objects".

David Livingstone Smith (2010), expanding greatly on the notion of 'bestial qualities' argues that dehumanisation originates in forms of 'folk biology' (page 179) and 'folk sociology', (page 199) as well as ancient philosophical notions such as the 'chain of being' (page 44) whereby people were believed quite literally to possess animalistic or angelic qualities, based on supposed essences of moral worthiness. He argues that this process can be understood as underpinning the social 'pseudospeciation' (page 66) which he sees as analogous to the biological process by which initially phenotypically similar populations of organisms become genetically distinct.

Despite this important (and often unobserved) distinction, theories of dehumanization in the context of collective violence appear to have in common five assumptions which, as I shall now argue, are beginning to be called into question by emerging research, these being: (1) the unitary or monolithic nature of dehumanisation as a process (2) the assumption that dehumanising beliefs are inherently essentialist (3) the assumption that dehumanisation is always pejorative (4) the assumption that dehumanisation is always applied to out-groups rather than in-groups and, finally, (5) the idea that dehumanisation necessarily implies moral exclusion.

And yet, over roughly the past decade, a literature has emerged which implicitly or explicitly challenges every one of these assumptions.

Dehumanisation as a monolithic phenomenon

I have just observed how an important tension seems to be latent in the definitions of dehumanisation used by scholars of mass killing – between dehumanisation as primarily ‘the denial of a person’s humanity’ and dehumanisation as primarily ‘ejection from the sphere of equal moral standing’. Nonetheless, this tension has generally not been seen as problematic in practice. Denying people moral standing means treating them as less than fully human, and considering people to be less than fully human means denying them equal moral standing. As we have seen, even Smith (2010) sees the function of dehumanisation in ranking people in terms of moral worthiness and its boundary marking role in ‘pseudospeciation’ as going hand in hand.

Such monolithic and generalised claims about what it is to dehumanise, however, seem difficult to sustain given the now well-known assertion by Nick Haslam, arguably the most important psychologist working in the area of dehumanisation, that dehumanisation can be understood as at least two distinct processes, dependent on the denial of a fundamentally different conception of what it means to be human in the first place. Drawing on philosophical approaches to categorisation, Haslam (2006) insists that humanity can be conceived of either in terms of ‘uniquely human’ characteristics, or of ‘human nature characteristics’. The former are those attributes which only humans are thought to have, such as language or rational thought. The latter are qualities which are not unique to humans, but may be seen as prototypically human, such as the possession of primary emotions or a capacity for empathy. To believe that a particular individual is less than usually endowed with qualities of the former or the latter sort leads to two basic types of dehumanisation. Animal-like dehumanisation implies the lack of qualities of language, culture, knowledge and so on. On the other hand, ‘machine like’ dehumanisation implies the lack of ‘human nature’ qualities such as emotionality or agency.

The idea of dehumanisation as necessarily implying a radical act of moral exclusion is also called into question in a different sense by the notion of infra-humanisation. While infra-humanisation, as coined by Leyens et. al. (2000) is a term specifically intended to allow ‘dehumanisation’ to be reserved for the most radical (and usually extremely violent) cases of moral disengagement by denial of humanity, it is unclear whether any firm distinction of kind, as opposed to degree, can be drawn between the relatively nuanced and everyday process of attribution of ‘inhuman’ qualities to one group by another, and the role of

'dehumanisation' in episodes of large scale collective violence and genocide. Indeed, in much of the psychological research, infrahumanisation and dehumanisation seem to be treated more or less interchangeably.

Dehumanisation and essentialism

Haslam's division between animalistic and mechanistic dehumanisation has not gone unacknowledged in the literature, but there is still not much consideration of whether it has particular implications for understanding how collective violence occurs, and what forms it takes. Smith seems at least implicitly to recognise Haslam's division as posing problems for dehumanisation as a unified explanation for collective violence, but his response is to take issue with the theory on the grounds that it misunderstands – so he believes – the essentialist nature of dehumanising beliefs.

In Smith's argument, (2010, 94-95) human infants (for example) lack most of the qualities that Haslam regards as 'uniquely human' or 'human nature', but are not seen as less than human on that account. Therefore it follows that when particular categories of person are dehumanised, the claim is based not on specific (and potentially observable) traits, but rather on beliefs about invisible, pervasive qualities of inhumanity that would continue to exist however fully members of an out-group might appear to resemble those in the in-group.

I am not aware of a direct response by Haslam to this line of criticism. However, given that Haslam's work specifically derives from his own prior interest in the psychology of essentialism, (Haslam, Rothschild and Ernst, 2000), it seems unlikely that Haslam would wish to accept the idea that his two types of dehumanisation are incompatible with dehumanisation as an essentialist process. Nonetheless, a possible response to Smith is that Haslam's work does indeed call into question the assumption that dehumanisation is essentialist in so far as it does not rely on *any* beliefs about the actual traits supposedly exhibited by those who are dehumanised. Indeed, Smith's example of the human infant can be turned on its head. After all human infants *are* dehumanised, in the sense that they are not only believed not to have the attributes of a fully competent individual, but also that they are 'denied full standing in the moral community'. In many cultures, infanticide is considered acceptable prior to an infant's initiation into its community. Conversely, the attribution of child-like qualities to adult members of another people is a common type of racist belief.

Indeed, Haslam has produced empirical research (Loughnan, Haslam and Kashima, 2009) which specifically appears to show that people who are told that a fictional group has certain particular characteristics are consistently likely to liken its members to either animals or robots, as appropriate, and vice versa. In other words, dehumanising beliefs apparently can condition people to literally expect that individual members of particular groups will have specific observable qualities – not merely that they will be suffused with an unobservable essence of inhumanity.

Dehumanisation as pejorative

If notions of dehumanisation can arise – at least sometimes – from the belief that certain individuals or groups are deficient in certain human qualities,

it seems to follow logically that individuals or groups may also be invested with *super human* qualities. Recently, the notion of superhumanity has begun to be explored in the literature. Haslam, Kashima, O'Loughnan and Shi (2008) examined the attributes which American, Chinese and Italian students assigned to three categories of being: animals, robots and supernatural beings. The authors noted that all three nationalities consistently regarded animals as inferior to humans in 'uniquely human' characteristics, robots as inferior in 'human nature' attributes (although Chinese students had a better opinion of the capacities of robots than their counterparts), and of supernatural beings as superior in uniquely human, but not in human nature attributes. This seems to invite the inference that supernatural beings were seen by all three groups as *relatively* lacking in qualities like compassion, in which they were seen to equal, but not exceed, humans.

Attributing superhuman characteristics to an out-group might seem to be no bad thing. But some argue that it, too, can serve to legitimate hostility. Waytz, Hoffman and Trawalter (2014) have demonstrated an apparent 'superhumanization bias' among American whites regarding American blacks. They claim that white people tend to disproportionately associate black people words signifying superhuman powers, and that this apparently makes them less willing to believe that black people suffer equivalent levels of pain to those suffered by white people under similar conditions.

Another idea which may be viewed as a distinctive form of 'superhumanisation' has Mark Juergensmeyer (2000, 185). Focusing specifically on intergroup hatred in religious as opposed to ethnic contexts, he claims to identify a process he calls 'satanization', whereby enemies are imagined as uniquely threatening because of their association with evil, but also supernatural and superhuman powers.

Self-dehumanisation

The idea that acts of violent atrocity and systematic abuse in some sense dehumanise perpetrators as well as victims is commonplace. However, theories of dehumanisation in collective violence have seldom made the leap of arguing that perpetrators might consciously or explicitly view themselves as other than fully human while actually engaged in inter-group violence. And yet the notion of 'self-dehumanisation' has recently been explored by psychological research which has shown that people who have transgressed social norms do indeed commonly regard *themselves* as less human as a result. This seems to cut both ways in terms of its potential relationship to future norm-violation. On the one hand, where juvenile delinquents come to accept an image of themselves as less than human, this seems to make them more likely to feel justified in continuing to commit crimes. At the same time, however, where perpetrators of crimes publicly acknowledge their sense of reduced humanity, this paradoxically helps to rehabilitate them as humans the eyes of others. Anders Breivik, Bastian and Crimston (2014) note, was widely seen as psychopathic and inhuman precisely because he did not see his own humanity as diminished in any way by the mass killing he had perpetrated.

And yet according to Breivik's own account, he deliberately underwent a process of moral disengagement from those he intended to kill. And indeed it

would seem that killers quite often self-report processes akin to Haslam's categories of mechanistic dehumanisation. Nazi soldiers, for example, spoke of having transformed themselves into mere 'instruments' (Neitzel and Weizer, 2013). Such phenomena are hardly unobserved in the literature on mass killing, but they are typically explained in terms of concepts such as de-individuation or diffusion of responsibility rather than dehumanisation per-se. And yet, once the idea that dehumanisation can be self-ascribed, there seems to be little reason not to include such cases as examples of dehumanisation as well.

Dehumanisation without moral exclusion

The idea that dehumanisation is intimately related to outgrouping, 'othering' or, specifically, moral exclusion runs as deep in the psychological research as it does elsewhere. However, as these studies seem to indicate, the relationship between the two may be more complex than sometimes seems to be assumed. Recent experimental work on outgrouping has demonstrated, paradoxically, that members of outgroups are actually viewed *more negatively* by members of ingroups when they clearly exhibit 'humanising' traits. This could be because of cognitive dissonance resulting from the desire to morally exclude a particular group. But it could also be because, as in the example of Breivik, the group in question is viewed not as morally dissociated, but rather as morally condemned, such that its failure to acknowledge its own reduced status is seen as adding insult to injury.

Under this interpretation, dehumanisation can be seen not as a way of expelling people from one's moral universe, but rather as a graded mechanism of moral sanction which might serve to facilitate social *inclusion*. In this case the label reflects a status of moral condemnation for which an individual can make reparations in order to restore her previous status of full humanity. This idea has increasingly also been advanced in various forms by scholars working on collective violence. In an extreme example, Lang (2010) argues that within the death camps of the Second World War:

What might look like the dehumanization of the other is instead a way to exert power over another human *without* ending the social relationship: it is an opportunity to sustain domination over the victims before (or even without) killing them... to make people the object of one's power is not necessarily to objectify them, but can be rather to subordinate their subjectivity to one's own.

Still more radically, perhaps, Alan Paige Fiske and Tage Shakti Rai's theory of 'virtuous violence' (2014) has recently sought to overturn the assumption that violence is the result of moral disengagement altogether. Arguing that it makes not more sense to explain violence as resulting from a lack of moral inhibitions than it would be to explain sex in the same way, they instead insist that nearly every example of violence can be understood in terms of attempts by the relevant actors to 'regulate' valued relationships. As such, even acts of violence that appear atrocious and incomprehensible to outsiders are, from the perpetrator's point of view, fundamentally moral acts intended to, for example, justly chastise a subordinate; initiate individuals into a communal bond, get even with a perceived peer, or achieve a greater good by means of actions perceived as a necessary but proportionate evil.

Viewing dehumanisation as part and parcel of the moral disengagement perspective, Fiske and Rai (2014, 156-159) express scepticism towards the value of the concept of dehumanisation in explaining collective violence. However, their critique of dehumanisation is surprisingly limited, and they are forced to concede empirical evidence as to its relevance. What they do not attempt to do is to reconsider – as I am attempting to do here – whether the role of dehumanisation in explaining acts of collective violence is in fact limited to its role in effecting moral disengagement. Indeed, taking the argument of this section to perhaps its ultimate extreme, it has even been proposed that the causal relationship between dehumanisation may sometimes be the precise inverse of what the moral disengagement perspective stipulates. Rather than dehumanisation serving to sever the moral relationship between perpetrator and victim and thus make possible violence, violence can serve to *humanise* the victim in the eyes of the perpetrator and thus make possible a relationship between the two. This is precisely what the theorist of global jihadism, Faisal Devji (2005) proposed when he hypothesised that:

The vast technological and numerical superiority of the airborne US troops deployed against Al-Qaeda and the Taliban then, quite inadvertently replays media pieces about the war between robots and humans, airborne and earth-based power, that are familiar from films such as *Dune*, *Terminator* or *Matrix*. In such epic confrontations, naturally, it is the very peculiarity and even savagery of the holy warrior that renders him more human and the American soldier who looks and behaves like a robot. It is in fact only the individualisation of the American soldier through his perversion, for example in the photographs of torture at Baghdad's Abu Ghraib prison, that makes him human – that and his death, which, like that of Arnold Schwarzenegger in *Terminator*, renders the robot human by making him mortal.

Indeed, developing this line of argument somewhat, it is possible to see even the conventional view of dehumanisation in collective violence as itself, in a sense, dehumanising, in so far as it assumes a model of human brotherhood which implicitly strips humans of one of the most fundamental human characteristics – their sociality. In situations of inter-group conflict, sectarian or ethnic killing of seemingly random members of particular groups – so called 'categorical terrorism' (Goodwin 2006) seems to be the very pinnacle of dehumanisation, since it seemingly denies any moral relationship on a 'purely human level' between perpetrator and victim. But killing a person because of their membership of a particular group inherently acknowledges that that person is deeply embedded in meaningful collective ties and therefore worthy of a share of collective responsibility, as opposed to being socially atomised. Paradoxically, then, even the most appalling acts of systemic violence have been justified as being essentially *humanising*. For example, the political philosopher Carl Schmitt, who apparently remained the end of his life an unrepentant Nazi, insisted that liberal modernity was dehumanising precisely because it sought to strip humans of the fundamental attribute of their humanity, namely, membership of a political community worth killing and being killed for.

Humanity and Inhumanity in Islamic State Propaganda

Islamic State is today a byword for unrestrained and unapologetic 'slaughter' (to use the group's own word for what it does).² Not only has the group systematically killed civilians and captured enemy fighters, it has typically acknowledged and openly celebrated these acts of killing, often incorporating them into explicit video propaganda. Moreover, Islamic State has freely acknowledged that it regularly kills people purely because of their membership of particular groups.

By and large, however, there has been little surprisingly little interaction between the literature on jihadist groups, or religiously motivated groups more generally, and the mainstream literature on mass killing. Even the concept of 'sectarianism' has tended to be defined in such a way as to present sectarian conflicts as little more than ethnic conflicts between groups of people who happen to look alike: who are what Brewer (1992) calls, 'phenotypically similar'. This definition may well apply usefully to contexts such as Northern Ireland, where the relevant groups were defined by religion, but asserted secular claims. But it is not so clear that it applies to cases where groups espouse specifically religious ideologies. It is true that some studies of genocide do engage with episodes such as the Albigensian Crusade, (Chiot and McCauley, 2010), studies of mass killing (perhaps because of the dominance itself of the term genocide, which itself implies ethnic motivation) remain dominated by work on, first and foremost, the Holocaust, and then by episodes of slaughter in the context of colonialism and ethno-nationalist civil war. Also, as mentioned above, Mark Juergensmeyer's notion of 'satanisation' remains perhaps the best grounded theory specific to the psychology of inter-religious killing, a concept which essentially re-casts traditional notions of inter-ethnic dehumanisation in religious language. But both examples are exceptional.

Meanwhile the literature on violent Islamist (jihadist) groups in particular, emerging largely from Middle East Studies on the one hand and 'Terrorism Studies' has tended to focus more on issues such as 'radicalisation' than the psychological explanations for the actors' willingness to engage in acts of unrestrained killing. This is not to say that dehumanisation rejected as a fundamental explanatory process. References to 'dehumanisation' and related processes of moral 'neutralisation' exist in the literature, (Hoffman, 1995; Cottee, 2010). It is just that the concept is seldom explored in any critical depth with regard to this particular set of cases. The same is true for the place of religiously motivated violence in the literature on mass killing more generally.

The organisation which presently refers to itself as *Al-Dawla Al-Islamiyya* (the Islamic State), previously the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria and, subsequently, the Islamic State of Iraq, has, throughout its various iterations, differed from Al Qaeda – its parent organisation – in three main ways. (Alexander, 2015; Atwan, 2015; Berger and Stern, 2015; Cockburn, 2015; McCants, 2015). First, it has been consistently more interested in building a territorial state than in waging a 'global jihad'. Second, it has been consistently

² The word commonly used is *dhabaha* - a word that normally applies to the killing of animals for meat.

practiced and preached a much more anti-Shiite sectarian agenda than the more conciliatory Al Qaeda and, thirdly, it has been much willing to commit itself to, and actually to use extreme violence in order to obtain local compliance. As such, it is an organisation which has practiced mass killing, and even genocidal actions (as in its history of violence against minority groups such as Yazidis and Mandaean) more clearly, consistently and unapologetically than have Al Qaeda and its affiliates.

Islamic State propaganda uses a rich vocabulary – much of it ultimately derived from canonical Islamic sources – to glorify itself and vilify its enemies. In this section, I will examine this discourse based on word counts taken from the recorded speeches issued by Islamic State’s official spokesman, Abu Muhammad al-Adnani, as well as quotations drawn from a wider range of sources, including Islamic State’s English language magazine, *Dabiq*, propaganda videos, and poetry and songs disseminated by Islamic State’s specialist *Al-Ajnad Media*.

Language used by Islamic State to describe itself and its enemies of three basic sorts: religious and politico-religious labels, straightforward ‘virtue talk’ (Leader-Maynard: 2014) and – of primary interest for this paper – metaphorical language which compares IS itself, those it identifies as its constituents, and its enemies to animals and objects.

Whether the mere use of animal-based metaphors to describe people amounts to dehumanisation is a moot point. A study by Haslam, Loughnan and Sun (2011) suggested that out of 40 common animal metaphors used in language, ‘offensiveness was predicted by the revulsion felt towards the animal and by the dehumanizing view of the target that it implied’, and that the meanings of animal metaphors centre on ‘disagreeableness, depravity and stupidity’. This distinction makes sense if we continue to treat dehumanisation as exclusively applying to dichotomous, boundary-drawing acts of moral disengagement. It makes less sense in the light of the development of a more flexible concept of dehumanisation as discussed above. The notion of animalistic versus mechanistic dehumanisation specifically implies that metaphors, consistently used, have consequences for the attributes inferred about groups of people. The idea of infra-humanisation suggests that gradations are possible in a person’s level of perceived humanity. The idea that it is possible to distinguish between ‘dehumanisation’ and ‘toxification’ (Neilsen, 2015) specifically assumes that the specifics of words matter. How is describing a greedy person as a pig different from describing a morally despicable or worthless person as a cockroach, except in degree? And how is the variable of *dehumanisation* saliently altered depending on whether a person or a group is being described using such terms?

Putting aside for the time being whether it amounts to genuine ‘animalistic dehumanisation’ Islamic State propaganda uses a fairly specific inventory of animal-comparisons. The two that feature most prominently (accounting for more than 60% of animal-based metaphors) are lions, and dogs. Unsurprisingly, most references to lions in Islamic State propaganda refer to Islamic State’s own fighters, to the extent that ‘lion’ is practically a synonym for mujahid. Moreover, it might readily be objected that comparison with lions is neither pejoratively intended, nor does the metaphor centre on notions such as ‘disagreeableness’ ‘depravity’ or ‘stupidity’.

The word dog is, in normal Arabic usage, a straightforwardly pejorative term which insults the person to whom it is applied by comparison with an animal culturally considered unclean. It is therefore a plausible conduit for dehumanizing notions. As it turns out in Islamic State propaganda, however, two apparently distinct usages of 'dog' occur. In – and only in – specific quotations from the *Sunna* of the prophet Muhammad, Islamic State draws attention to the notion that 'the blood of the unbelievers does not equal that of a dog'. (al-Adnani, 2012). Here, the significance of the dog appears to be simply that dogs are, according to some schools of Islamic thought, considered to be *najis* or ritually impure.

Whenever IS refers to groups or individuals as dogs in its own words, however, it invariably seems to have a more precise meaning in mind. Here, the word is used to imply two key attributes (as well as, presumably, the implicit notion of uncleanness): ferocity and (misplaced) loyalty. In this usage, the word applies either to groups of Sunni Muslims opposed to Islamic State or, more occasionally, to specific individual non-Sunni Muslims (as, for example, when Nouri al-Maliki is referred to as the 'dog of Iran' or the House of Saud are the 'dogs of the Jews' or Obama is 'your' (America's) dog. It is, virtually without exception, never applied to groups of non-Sunni Muslims.

In contrast to the notion of the 'dog', the 'lion' metaphor as used by IS seems an unlikely candidate for conveying dehumanising claims. As Haslam, Loughnan and Sun argue, animal metaphors can be used to convey the idea that people are 'desirably wild'. However, in referring comparing its own to lions, IS is not merely claiming that they are courageous or 'lion-hearted'. Rather, it characterises lions and mujahidin as ferocious, ravenous and merciless predators. wolf, hyena, fox or the snake.

In short, the image of the 'lion' in the meaning system of IS propaganda seems to double with that of the dog (and to a lesser extent, other predatory animals, such as the wolf, hyena or fox to which its enemies are more infrequently compared). Both lions and dogs (or wolves, or hyenas) are understood as ferocious, carnivorous, predatory and loyal (at least to one another). The difference is in this case one not of attributes but purely of essence – lions are ritually pure and inherently noble, while the other animals are not. If, as argued above, dehumanisation can also entail 'self-dehumanisation' or 'superhumanisation', then attributing to one's own clearly animal-like characteristics even with complimentary intent is arguably a form of dehumanisation.

Another set of animal metaphors used by Islamic State works to position groups as passive victims – prey animals. While the number of references in the corpus of speeches by Abu Muhammad al-Adnani is too small to draw firm conclusions here, it appears that a similar doubling may occur, whereby references to Sunni Muslims being slaughtered compare them to cattle whereas references to other groups compare them to sheep. Sometimes, unbelievers are also described as being killed by the mujahidin 'like flies or cockroaches'. (Al-Adnani, 2012) While flies and cockroaches are commonly associated with filth and disgust, the main purpose of this comparison, when used, seems to be illustrative simply of the ease with which the mujahidin are able to kill their enemies.

Generally, when Shiites, who are seen by Islamic State as its primary enemy, are referred to as a group they are not compared to unclean animals, but are instead simply described directly as ritually unclean – *najis*, *qadhir* or *danas*. These terms appear to be reserved for Shiites and, in more specific and occasional instances, for other non-Muslims. By contrast, the deeds of Sunni Muslims with whom IS disagrees are sometimes described using the word *khabith*, which means ‘dirty’, or ‘malignant’, but in a more ordinary sense.

Perhaps surprisingly, IS seldom directly refers to non-Muslims using animalistic or toxifying language. Where such language does occur, it refers either to individuals (Obama, for example, is described as a dog or a mule), or it appears in the context of direct quotations from the Sunna, as opposed to statements made in IS’s own words.

What is the significance of this language, and is it to be understood as ‘dehumanising’? IS, in common with mainstream Islamic theology, conceptualises human nature in terms of the notion of *fitra*, a concept which refers more generally to the notion of divine order, and an appropriate and ordained set of behaviours mandated for each category of being. An article in *Dabiq* (2014) Muslims are warned that living among non-Muslims may pose risks to the purity of their *fitra*. Such notions of purity are closely reminiscent of ethnic and racial distinctions, and are reinforced by claims about the ritual impurity of the blood of unbelievers. At the same time, however, *fitra* is not clearly an anthropocentric concept of human nature, since it concerns not so much the question of what distinguishes humans from animals, as the question of what the proper nature is of all types of divinely created being.

Elsewhere, however, IS does draw a distinction between humans and animals. But this distinction is founded not so much on essentialist notions of inherited superiority or inferiority, but rather on the association between the situation of animals and a Darwinian (or Hobbesian) struggle for survival. As Abu Muhammad al-Adnani insists.

Without this condition [Islamic law] being met, authority becomes nothing more than kingship, dominance and rule, accompanied with destruction, corruption, oppression, subjugation, fear, and the decadence of the human being and his descent to the level of animals (Al-Adnani: 2013)

To humanize people, in this belief system, is to socialize them within the Islamic system, outside of which atrocious and unending violence is simply an inevitability. As such, IS takes pride in the ‘harshness’ which its members display towards those outside the group, often seeking to emphasise the contrast between the ‘soft-heartedness’ of the mujahidin towards fellow believers and their merciless ‘harshness’ to outsiders.

In other words, it would seem that when IS describes its own fighters, or its enemies, as savage predators, the intention is equally to strip them of human attributes within the context of their interaction. Indeed, notwithstanding IS’s black and white world view, whereby it is entirely good and its enemies entirely bad, its rhetoric very frequently uses the device of presenting itself and its opponents as mirror images, such that its opponents are presented as unrelentingly hostile in the same terms as IS is unrelentingly hostile to them, and as being mutually supportive of one another in the same way that IS is mutually supportive of its own. The enemy are *kuffar* with respect to what IS believes, but

IS also stresses the point that they are *kuffar* with respect to what the enemy believes. There is a tension of emphasis, then, in IS rhetoric between an ultra-nationalist discourse which promotes the notion of Sunni Muslims as a nation among nations, and savagery as the outcome of the frustration of their national ambitions and, on the other hand, a universalism which seeks to conquer the world and which therefore recognizes no possibility of coexistence. And this tension is reflected in its understanding of humanity and inhumanity – that is, whether inhumanity is a primarily a product of the savagery that results from conflict, and which therefore may characterize its own fighters as well as those of those of the enemy, or whether its enemies are inherently less human than its own.

As one speech puts it:

And the individual unbelievers who do not gather together in enmity and hostility against Islam, Islam offers its guarantee of security to these people in the Lands of Islam, and Allah - Glorious and Majestic - has commanded us that we must be neighbourly towards them until they have heard the word of Allah, then we shall make our calling to them [nablaghhum] concerning their beliefs without exaggerating in any way, because Islam is watchful over every heart that it should be advised and guided, and that it should return, yes, because it is the way of mercy and right guidance, not the way of hostility and massacre, for indeed it makes jihad with the sword in order to break the material strength of brutality and iniquity, which attempts to which attempts to come between individuals and hearing the words of Allah, and attempts to come between them and the knowledge that Allah sent down, and attempts to come between them and guidance, just as it attempts to come between them and the liberation of the slave from slavery, and to disperse them to the worship of things other than Allah, and whoever is well aware of this, know that the mujahidin, when they kill the uncivilised, [ghashim], oppressive, hostile unbeliever, the one upon whom guidance is a lost cause [may'us min hadayya], whose blood, from Allah's [point of view] does not equal that of a dog, [they do it] in order, by him, to save others, and convey them successively, to paradise, and the Islamic State has not established the bitterness of the ages on one inch of ground, unless it was to protect blood and have mercy and forgiveness on those who make war on it and shed the blood of its sons. Thus history did not know a conquest more merciful than that of the Muslims, and it will always remain the teaching [qawl] of the Islamic State towards its enemies after [it has] established [itself over them] "go, for you have been released". (Al-Adnani: 2012)

Here the notion that the unbeliever's blood is worth less than that of a dog seems to be deliberately nuanced to refer not to unbelievers in general, but only to the 'uncivilised' or 'hostile' unbeliever. And yet, for IS, 'civilization' is of course ultimately synonymous with what it understands to be Islamic order.

As we have just seen, Islamic State propaganda contains uses of language suggestive of ideas of dehumanization, but the picture is not clear-cut. Comparisons suggestive of 'animalistic' dehumanization seem to be applied more commonly to those perceived to be treacherous members of Islamic State's own moral community to outsiders, and this language serves not to dissociate these people from the community, but rather to express moral judgment.

In this section, I consider the question from the opposite angle, by focusing on how far dehumanizing representations and beliefs appear in the way IS presents and justifies its own acts of violence.

As a rule, IS is notoriously candid about its own violent practices. For

example, in issue 9 of *Dabiq* magazine a woman (presumably) writing under the pen name of Umm Sumayyah al-Muhajirah expresses her 'alarm' that:

Islamic State supporters (may Allah forgive them) rushed to defend the Islamic State... after kafir media touched upon the State's capture of the Yazidi women. So the supporters started denying the matter as if the soldiers of the Khilafah had committed a mistake or evil. (2015)

In her rebuttal of Islamic State's own supporters, she is at pains to argue that the practice of taking concubines in war is well attested and legitimately Islamic.

A similarly unapologetic account appeared previously in the same magazine concerning IS's original treatment of Iraqi Yazidis on capturing the Jabal Sinjar region.

Upon conquering the region of Sinjar in Wilayat Ninawa, the Islamic State faced a population of Yazidis, a pagan minority existent for ages in the region of Iraq and Sham. Their continual existence to this day is a matter that Muslims should question as they will be asked about it on Judgement Day, considering that Allah had revealed Ayat as-Sayf (the verse of the sword) over 1400 years ago... Prior to the taking of Sinjar, Shari'ah students in the Islamic State were tasked to research the Yazidis to determine if they should be treated as an originally mushrik group or one that originated as Muslims and then apostatized, due to many of the related Islamic rulings that would apply to the group, its individuals and their families. Because of the Arabic terminologies used by this group to describe themselves or their beliefs, some contemporary Muslim scholars have classified them as possibly an apostate sect, not an originally mushrik religion, but upon further research, it was determined that this group is one that existed since the pre-Islamic jāhiliyyah, but became "Islamized" by the surrounding Muslim population, language, and culture, although they never accepted Islam nor claimed to have adopted it. The apparent origin of the religion is found in the Magianism of ancient Persia, but reinterpreted with elements of Sabianism, Judaism, and Christianity, and ultimately expressed in the heretical vocabulary of extreme Sufism. Accordingly, the Islamic State dealt with this group as the majority of fuqahā' have indicated how mushrikīn should be dealt with. Unlike the Jews and Christians, there was no room for jizyah payment. Also, their women could be enslaved unlike female apostates who the majority of the fuqahā' say cannot be enslaved and can only be given an ultimatum to repent or face the sword. After capture, the Yazidi women and children were then divided according to the Shari'ah amongst the fighters of the Islamic State who participated in the Sinjar operations, after one fifth of the slaves were transferred to the Islamic State's authority to be divided as khums. (Dabiq, 2014)

Worthy of note here is the relatively careful treatment of Yazidi beliefs, which, contrary to wild rumours of Satan worship prevalent in online discussion, appear to be roughly in line with mainstream expert claims about the tenets of Yazidism. Nor, again, are Yazidis denigrated as such – beyond the matter-of-fact assessment of the group as 'originally mushrik'. It should go without saying, of course, that this almost bureaucratic language masks the visceral brutality experienced by Yazidis in practice.

The account provided by IS for its massacre and mass enslavement of Yazidis in Iraq is interestingly contrasted by an account in the previous of *Dabiq* explaining IS's notoriously brutal treatment of the *Shu'aytat* tribes in Syria and Iraq.

...many Muslims sitting at home, living in “modernized” societies, never experiencing war or tribalism, naively said to themselves “he [Abu Mus’ab al-Zarqawi] is declaring war on whole tribes! How can that be done? What do individual members of the tribe have to do with the actions of specific tribe members, or even with the decisions of tribal elders? The problem with these people is that they know nothing about human societies except what they have experienced in the “modernized” cities of the world, where tribalism has died out, and where the few tribes that still exist no longer play any important role as whole entities in their societies and communities. These people assume that the “modern-day” city of individuality and individualism is all that exists outside their homes.

However, this case is different in many parts of the world, particularly in the more rural and nomadic regions. There the tribe – when intoxicated by jahiliyya – still acts like a body with some kind of bigoted head or like a gang maddened by the mob mentality of extreme ignorance. They might move like a flock of birds or school of fish, albeit less gracefully due to their extreme ignorance. When one experiences tribes of this nature after living years in the city, he realises the wisdom of Shaykh Abu Mus’ab al-Zarqawi. It also becomes easier for him to tie events related in the Sunnah and Sirah of the prophet with events today. He then knows why the prophet treated the Arab and Israelite tribes as collective wholes whenever tribe members broke their covenants with him. (Dabiq, 2014)

This latter account seems to be remarkable in two ways. In the first paragraph, what we find amounts to a critique of modernity of which Carl Schmitt (1976) might very well have approved. To develop its line of argument, one might say that just as nationalists, brought up within nation states, look at the world beyond and see it as primordially divided into aspiring nations; and just as religious fundamentalists such as IS look at the world and order it into confessional groupings on the model of the Islamic Ummah so, with similar self-delusion, do citizens of post-nationalist states look at their own societies, see them as self-consciously imagined communities, and hence see the whole world as made up of similarly negotiable constructions. But where collective solidarity is a social fact, it legitimates collective violence no less than is judicial violence justified by similarly mythical beliefs in individual responsibility.

And yet this argument is apparently insufficient, given that it is then necessary, after all, to fall back on two remarkable and dehumanizing metaphors which do indeed seem designed to ‘nullify’ and ‘morally disengage’ from the suffering caused by Islamic State’s actions. Yet again, it is interesting that this language seems necessary specifically where the victims are fellow Sunni Muslims, rather than religious outsiders.

Indeed, this paragraph seems to offer a valuable starting point for considering what *does* amount to dehumanization in the context of IS rhetoric. Here, the description of Shu’aytat tribespeople is dehumanizing in terms of the theoretical literature strictly because:

- The tribespeople are denied *individual agency* – not simply because the tribe is discussed as a group, but because it is specifically stated that individual tribespeople do not think and behave as individuals
- The tribespeople are denied *culture* – in contrast to Yazidism, which is characterized as a specific religion with a history and a particular set of beliefs, the tribalism of the *Shu’aytat* is a purely negative phenomenon arising from their pre-Islamic ‘extreme ignorance’ (jahiliyya) with which they are ‘intoxicated’

- The tribespeople are denied *intelligence* and *emotional sensitivity*, when they are described not only as animal-like but as exhibiting 'less elegance' than the animals with which they are compared

Agency and individuality, as noted in the theoretical review above, correspond to the 'human nature' attributes denial of which is 'mechanistic dehumanisation'. Intelligence and culture correspond to the 'uniquely human' attributes, denial of which constitutes 'animalistic dehumanisation'. Both are apparently present in the paragraph justifying indiscriminate massacres of the Shu'aytat. Neither is clearly present in the one justifying violence against the Yazidis. But how representative are either of these examples of IS's official understanding of its acts of killing overall?

While textual sources such as those relied on up to now, offer a useful starting point for anatomising IS's basic arguments for violence, a richer resource for understanding how it wishes its violent acts to be perceived can be found in its copious video propaganda. While, in fact, the bulk of Islamic State's video output does not feature violence, focusing rather on the organisation's ability to govern the territory it rules effectively, graphic scenes of slaughter were – particularly in the months following IS's establishment of its self-proclaimed caliphate – a key part of its overall message. Moreover, these videos – particularly in their longer-form examples often seem deliberately designed to provide a broad presentation of IS's violent activities, dealing with multiple enemy groups and forms of killing.

Killing, as represented in Islamic State videos falls into basically four categories: battlefield killing, in which IS fighters are shown overrunning the positions of their enemies and exulting over their dead bodies; 'hunting' in which IS fighters track down and kill individual enemies, shooting them in their cars or invading their homes; massacres, in which IS kills large numbers of captured enemies – and, finally, executions, which differ from massacres in that they are presented as more ritualized and elaborately staged events. Executions in turn can be approximately subdivided into executions of 'political' opponents and judicial executions of 'criminals' such as homosexuals, witches or traitors. This latter category overlaps with videos of non-lethal violence such as limb-amputations.

Individuality and Emotion

Acts of killing by IS vary in how much attention is given to the victims as individual subjects. Scenes of captured militants lying face down and being machine gunned en masse are common. However, even where people are killed en masse, IS is often propagandistically interested in according them some kind of identity or individuality. In battlefield sequences, the camera often dwells on the contorted faces and bodies of dead enemies. In the video *On the Path of the Prophet* (2015) there is a sequence in which a large group of captured Syrian soldiers is massacred. Emphasis is placed on showing the terror on individual faces. In the 'hunting' sequences, the identity of those killed by IS is emphasized in an attempt to prove the victims' 'guilt'. In group beheadings, significant effort may go into visually introducing the victims as individual subjects by using reaction shots and other close-ups of their faces as the execution proceeds. In the mass beheading sequence in *Though the Disbelievers Dislike It*, (2015) victims are clearly introduced early on, with especial emphasis being placed on a young,

good looking man who is beheaded by Muhammad Emwazi. In *Soothing the Believers' Chests*, (2015) in which the captured Jordanian pilot Mu'adh al-Kasasbah is burned to death, the execution sequence follows a lengthy interview which seems to function as a confession. The sequence itself uses rapid cascades of images to create the impression of cinematic 'flashback' which, interwoven with facial-close ups create the impression of offering a window into the thoughts of the penitent victim prior to death. Even where killing is much less personal, however, IS may accuse its victims of quasi-individual crimes. In *Come up behind them and put them to flight* (2015) a jihadi can be seen screaming at a heap of recently killed Iraqi army soldiers, asking them "why do you insult 'A'isha? 'A'isha is our mother!"

Culture and Intelligence

A notoriously crucial dimension of IS violence is cultural destruction and IS videos frequently include scenes of cultural destruction alongside, and indeed as the culmination of sequences featuring the destruction of human bodies. When it smashes statues of ancient Middle Eastern civilizations, and in bulldozing or blowing up archaeological sites; or when it blows up Shiite mosques or smashes Shiite icons, its primary stated motivation is simply to destroy what it believes to be *shirk* or idol worship. However, IS is also acutely and explicitly aware of how far the cultural artifacts it destroys are valued by its enemies and the anguish it causes in breaking them. In issue 8 of *Dabiq* (2015) it notes how:

Last month, the soldiers of the Khilāfah, with sledgehammers in hand, revived the Sunnah of their father Ibrāhīm ('alayhis-salām) when they laid waste to the shirkī legacy of a nation that had long passed from the face of the Earth. They entered the ruins of the ancient Assyrians in Wilāyat Nīnawā and demolished their statues, sculptures, and engravings of idols and kings. This caused an outcry from the enemies of the Islamic State, who were furious at losing a "treasured heritage." The mujāhidīn, however, were not the least bit concerned about the feelings and sentiments of the kuffār

Even at the moment of death, IS sometimes represents its victims as cultured beings. In *Though the Disbelievers Dislike It*, as the Syrian airmen who are about to be beheaded kneel in anticipation of their fate, their lips can clearly be seen to move – presumably in prayer. In *A Message Signed in Blood the Nation of the Cross* (2015) this is made explicit when the accompanying text says 'they supplicate what they believe in and die on the path of hellfire'. In *The Clashing of Swords*, IS fighters disguised as Iraqi security forces enter a man's house and lead him away. The terrified man keeps saying, over and over again 'I suspect that you are *Da'esh*, I suspect that you are *Da'esh*' (an Arabic acronym for 'The Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant', sometimes considered pejorative). In another, a father and his son are made to dig their own graves together.

Conclusion

Dehumanisation, understood as a mechanism of moral disengagement implies precisely the opposite of what IS typically claims about its violent practices: that they are not personal. Indeed, it is the intimacy of IS violence, the

group's unflinching admission of many of its most problematic acts, the group's apparent ability to place itself in its enemies' shoes in order to better imagine how to inflict most suffering upon them that makes its actions so sensational and shocking.

And yet, as this paper has argued, dehumanization has evolved into a subtler concept in recent years. And IS's discourses about what is human and what is inhuman, and the way it relates these to violence, can be productively illuminated in terms of this. Rather than viewing its enemies as monolithically or simplistically subhuman, IS deploys notions of inhumanity in a situated, dynamic and even reflexive fashion. For IS, attributes of inhumanity may apply to both self and other, but ultimately are more to be located in the *conflictual relationship* that is understood to exist between the two.

Another key point is that IS's use of literally de *humanizing* language – i.e., language which seems to imply that certain categories of humans have traits similar to animals, is apparently mediated by the level and type of out-grouping that is going on. Perhaps surprisingly, it seems to be more likely to use animal comparison the closer those labelled come to the IS in-group. Sunni Muslims are subject to animal comparisons, and individual Shiites are occasionally when their shared status as Arabs is uppermost. By contrast, total outsiders – non-Muslims and especially non-Muslim Westerners attract few negative epithets, perhaps because they do not need to be morally condemned in order to be portrayed as an enemy. The most extreme language – toxifying, rather than dehumanizing per se is applied to Shiites, who are the object of IS's most significant genocidal ambitions. It may be that it is precisely because Shiites cannot easily be characterized in terms of dehumanizing language, whether in the form of moral judgements (which are irrelevant to those outside IS's self-identified moral community), or more literal, racialized notions of subhumanity (because Shiites are not seriously theorized by IS as differing in ethnic or racial terms), that they represent such a threat to the integrity of IS's moral universe.

Rather than seeing dehumanization as a one-dimensional process forming a link in a single chain leading ineluctably to mass killing of the dehumanized other by the humanized in-group, we do better to understand dehumanization as part of a tool kit of rhetorical moves which are available to those seeking to justify intercommunal violence in different contexts and situations. Elucidating these dimensions seems to offer rich opportunities for future research.

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