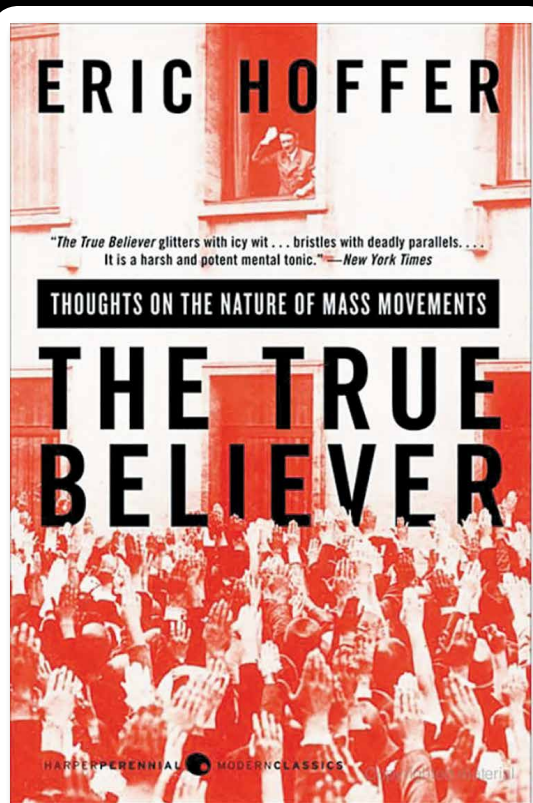


## The True Believer

### Thoughts on the Nature of Mass Movements

Eric Hoffer, Harper Perennial,  
New York, 2010, 192 pages



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Many theories attempt to define and offer solutions for dealing with the brand of radical Islam that fuels Middle Eastern movements such as Daesh.<sup>1</sup> Other attempts have been made to demonstrate that radical Islam is not Islam at all, except in the most superficial or perverted manner. The constant claim in those scenarios is that Islamist ideology not only misrepresents Islam, but it can also be viewed as “a virulent vision all its own, one that its adherents have created by plucking selections from centuries of traditions.”<sup>2</sup> However, this argument rarely extends far enough to give the “virulent vision” a name other than *radical*, or *fundamental* Islam, let alone suggest remedies.<sup>3</sup> Common to both of these approaches is the base assumption that the problem of Daesh and al-Qaida should be defined in Islamic terms. An alternative methodology, one that applies the sociology of mass movements rather than the prejudices of religion, removes ipso facto the contentiousness of religious debate and provides insights into—and new methods for countering—these movements’ appeal.<sup>4</sup>

As such, Eric Hoffer’s study in *The True Believer: Thoughts on the Nature of Mass Movements* not only

provides a roadmap for analyzing radical Islam as something other than religious heterodoxy but also offers solutions that suggest new approaches to dealing with the many, apparently intractable issues radical Islam presents.<sup>5</sup> The work is broken into four main parts, though two apply most practically to the mass movement of radical Islam: a discussion of why mass movements have appeal and an analysis of the traits most likely to produce converts to a mass movement.<sup>6</sup>

#### The Appeal of Mass Movements

Two points that apply directly to the rise of Daesh as a mass movement appear in the beginning of *The True Believer*. First, Hoffer states,

The contribution of the Western democracies to the awakening of the East has been indirect and certainly unintended. They have kindled an enthusiasm of resentment against the West; and it is this anti-Western fervor which is at present rousing the Orient from its stagnation of centuries.<sup>7</sup>

Second, instead of merely blaming discontent for the rise of mass movements, Hoffer digs deeper. He situates

the rise of mass movements at the intersection of discontent and power, stating,

For men to plunge headlong into an undertaking of vast change, they must be intensely discontented yet not destitute, and they must have the feeling that by the possession of some potent doctrine, infallible leader or some new technique they have access to a source of irresistible power.<sup>8</sup>

Here, the potential effects of the various Arab Spring movements come to mind, albeit stifled or subsumed, with both discontent in a present situation and hope in a doctrine (at that point, democracy) strongly intermixed across the Middle East. Where democracy could not take root, which was nowhere in any of those movements—not in Egypt, not in Yemen, certainly not in Syria or Iraq, nor in the states of the Arabian Gulf—Islamism provided and still provides an alternate source for the inculcation of a sense of “irresistible power.”

The individual’s craving for that power is Hoffer’s next main point. He maintains that, rather than a Western concept of individual self-sufficiency offering a palliative, mass movement “attracts and holds a following not because it can satisfy the desire for self-advancement, but because it can satisfy the passion for self-renunciation.”<sup>9</sup> Individualism scares most of the masses, more so with those who have come from a communal mindset, for when they succeed within a Western milieu those “who attain fortune and fame often find it difficult to gain entrance into the exclusive circles of the majority. They are thus made conscious of their foreignness.”<sup>10</sup> Those who fail, and have neither individual success nor any longer a sense of communal identity, “see their lives and the present as spoiled beyond remedy and they are ready to waste and wreck both; hence, their recklessness and their will to chaos and anarchy.”<sup>11</sup> In the particular case of a deeply tribal and communal society such as those that comprise most of the Middle East, and especially with hope of a transition to democracy waning, Hoffer’s statement that “all the advantages brought by the West are ineffectual substitutes for the sheltering and soothing anonymity of communal existence” rings especially true.<sup>12</sup> Mass movements, like those on which Daesh and al-Qaida fuel their respective brands of radical Islam, provide the anonymity of a bygone commune, a purpose into which individual strivings can be melded and forgotten, and a power the subsumed individual can believe irresistible.

Hoffer makes two additional points in this section that are worth mentioning in the context of Islamic radicalism. First, he states that mass movements are a zero-sum proposition, competitive against one another for the raw material of financing and recruitment.<sup>13</sup> This bears out in the ongoing conflict not only in Syria between various splinter Islamist groups that coalesced into a dominant Daesh presence in early 2014, but also in the now apparent struggle in various parts of the world between Daesh and al-Qaida.<sup>14</sup> Second, Hoffer begins his analysis by emphasizing that mass movements are interchangeable with one another. He says, in reference to the West, “In the past, religious movements were the conspicuous vehicles of change. The conservatism of a religion—its orthodoxy—is the inert coagulum of a once highly reactive sap.”<sup>15</sup> He continues with other cases, “In modern times, the mass movements involved in the realization of vast and rapid change are revolutionary and nationalist.”<sup>16</sup> He cites numerous examples of this interchangeability, and sums up the entire equation by stating,

Since all mass movements draw their adherents from the same types of humanity and appeal to the same types of mind, it follows:

(a) all mass movements are competitive, and the gain of one in

adherents is the loss of all the others; (b) all mass movements are interchangeable. ... A religious movement may develop into a social revolution or a nationalist movement; a social revolution, into militant nationalism or a religious movement; a nationalist movement into a social revolution or a religious movement.<sup>17</sup>

It just so happens that the sap flowing now, not soon to coagulate in the Middle East, takes the form of a religious movement, rather than a social

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or nationalist movement. Still, to shift emphasis away from the “religious” aspect and toward the idea of this being a “movement,” and to understand that the religious dynamic might just as easily be (or become) social or nationalist, allows a wider range of options for secular engagement with, or against, the phenomenon.

## Potential Converts

Hoffer next tackles the definition and categorization of the types of potential converts a mass movement draws upon. The key insight here is that neither the abject poor nor the unified poor present a threat, but that—among others—the newly poor, the creative poor, and a category he calls “misfits” contribute most of the participants to a mass movement’s active phase. Hoffer says it “is usually those whose poverty is relatively recent, the ‘new poor,’ who throb with the ferment of frustration. The memory of better things is as fire in their veins.”<sup>18</sup>

It is worth noting here that the driving force behind much of Daesh’s military success has been not a religious fervor but the planning, abilities, and impassioned involvement of a number of Saddam Hussein’s former military officers.<sup>19</sup> These officers were marginalized due to disbandment of the Iraqi Army after the U.S.-led invasion of 2003. They became poor, yet remembered, and still remember, the power and status conferred through their positions in Hussein’s regime. As unreliable and potentially murderous as these individuals might be, at least in terms of participation in a mass movement such as radical Islam, as Hoffer says, they are not a lost cause but rather, “They (the veterans) are receptive to the preaching of a proselytizing movement and yet do not always make staunch converts. For they are not irrevocably estranged from the self; they do not see it as irrevocably spoiled ... the slightest evidence of progress and success reconciles them with the world and their selves.”<sup>20</sup>

This last aspect likely contributed to the success of the Anbar Awakening, as Sunni leaders, many of whom were former Baathists, united in the hope of working as part of, rather than against, the new Iraqi government.<sup>21</sup> Even now, leaders of Daesh drawn from among former Iraqi Baathist officials and military personnel do not seem to be irrevocably committed, as one local described Daesh’s current *wali*, or leader, in Anbar itself, “I last saw him in 2009. He complained that he was very poor. He is an old friend, so I gave him some money ... He was fixable. If someone had given him a job and a

salary, he wouldn’t have joined the Islamic State. There are hundreds, thousands like him.”<sup>22</sup>

Additionally, in those areas of Syria and Iraq where citizens had been relatively affluent prior to the start of the civil war in 2011, many men turned to Daesh as a means to maintain the livelihood of their families.<sup>23</sup> The need to maintain a livelihood would not be such a motivating impulse if the citizens in these areas had always been abjectly poor, for, as Hoffer says,

The poor on the borderline of starvation live purposeful lives. To be engaged in a desperate struggle for food and shelter is to be wholly free from a sense of futility. The goals are concrete and immediate. ... What need could they have for “an inspiring super-individual goal which would give meaning and dignity to their lives?” They are immune to the appeal of a mass movement.<sup>24</sup>

Thus, for both the core of former Iraqi government and military veterans participating in radical Islam’s mass movements, and for the percentage of men who permit, or even assist this particular mass movement in order that they themselves and their families not become part of the *new poor*, the provision of financial and social lucre, or even hope, may sway significant and influential partisans toward more desirable pursuits.

Another category of potential manpower from Hoffer’s work relates specifically to Daesh’s recruiting; these are the “bored.” Hoffer says of them: “There is perhaps no more reliable indicator of a society’s ripeness for a mass movement than the prevalence of unrelieved boredom.”<sup>25</sup> The attraction of fighting for Daesh proves powerful in this regard, especially “to the bored, secure, and the uninspired in Western liberal democracies” to whom fighting in this mass movement provides “a thrilling cause and call to action that promises glory and esteem in the eyes of friends.”<sup>26</sup> This segment of the population’s needs for excitement and purpose, rather than (or in conjunction with) approaches aimed at interdicting the beginning stages of *religious* radicalization, should be studied.

Finally, one group Hoffer labels as difficult for mass movements to recruit—the unified poor—presents itself as a potential remedy for decreasing Daesh’s appeal. The unified poor tend not to join mass movements because, even though they are not wealthy, they have a strong sense of identity and collective self-worth derived from

that identity.<sup>27</sup> Hoffer goes on to actually prescribe this as a remedy for mass movements, saying that “any arrangement which either discourages atomistic individualism or facilitates self-forgetting or offers chances for action and new beginnings tends to counteract the rise and spread of mass movements.”<sup>28</sup> As such, rather than encourage the individualism and democratic sense of self so embedded in a liberal Western worldview (which would be counter to the goal of diffusing a mass movement), actions and programs that instead discourage individualism and encourage small-group cohesion along with opportunity, would reduce the allure of Daesh and other organizations built on these religiously styled mass movement principles.<sup>29</sup> The exact type of promoted small group might vary from place to place and from time to time, depending on local conditions, perhaps attaining from traditional tribal structures, guilds or clubs, family, school, military affiliation, or other sources of identity and advantage.

## Conclusion

Hoffer’s treatment of mass movements, when applied to radical Islam, approaches the sources of the movement’s appeal in a way that does not directly engage with, or condemn, Islam as a religion, therefore falling closer to the sphere of influence that secular Western governments and institutions are structured to effect. Some of Hoffer’s solutions and ideas about how best to engage with and diffuse a mass movement can be applied directly to Daesh and al-Qaida, and may yield new approaches and techniques:

**The substitution of one mass movement for another.** Hoffer states, “this method of stopping one movement by substituting another ... is not always without danger, and it does not usually come cheap.”<sup>30</sup> By way of example, he cites pre-World War II Italy and Germany where “practical businessmen acted in an entirely ‘logical’ manner when they encouraged a Fascist and Nazi movement in order to stop communism. But in doing so, these practical and logical people promoted their own liquidation.”<sup>31</sup> Likewise, substituting something like democracy in the Middle East (such as nearly happened during the Arab Spring) could unintentionally destabilize regimes that have been useful partners and important pillars of the global economy. Despite such risk, it is worth noting that the zero-sum nature of mass movements, as claimed by Hoffer, will mean that—if true—any other rising movement, ideally less

committed to violence against the Western world, will decrease the resources upon which Daesh and other religiously based movements can draw.

**The substitution of tribal or other small group structures for individualism.** These alternatives could possibly enhance a locale’s ability to stabilize itself and resist proselytization into religiously based mass movements. However, this essentially means encouraging an older, and likely less liberal, way of life. It is, as Hoffer says, an equation where “equality without freedom creates a more stable social pattern than freedom without equality.”<sup>32</sup>

**The treatment of specific sectors of people from whom mass movements draw their strength.** This applies specifically to veterans, formerly successful persons trying not to become newly poor, and the bored. An approach aimed at these target populations may be the most feasible over the short term. Institutions and programs already exist to tackle similar problems.<sup>33</sup> The suggestion here would be to look at those programs and determine whether priorities, messaging strategies, funding sources, and suitable alternatives for hope and financial stability are in place; or if it could be shifted from other approaches that might be wrongly aimed at religious counter-narratives to instead relieve the conditions that conspire to spoil an individual’s sense of self-satisfaction.

**Emigration.** Finally, and perhaps most practically, Hoffer says, “emigration offers some of the things the frustrated hope to find when they join a mass movement, namely, change and a chance for a new beginning.”<sup>34</sup> Since mass emigration away from the Levant, North Africa, and Yemen already occurs, legally and illegally, perhaps it would be wise to examine the streams of emigration not just for the potential to help individuals, or to ensure that radicalization—or radicals themselves—do not cross borders, but to also look at the overall situation as a possible panacea for the illness upon which the mass movement of radical Islam feeds. This would mean encouraging emigration, and promoting and facilitating it as a way to relieve pressures fueling mass movements—through some sort of controlled and global mechanism—rather than continuing the current system of temporary camps and temporary solutions. Hoffer maintains that mass movements arise when people see their individual lives to be irremediably spoiled and cannot find a worthwhile purpose in self-advancement.<sup>35</sup> The dedication, devotion, loyalty, and self-surrender that fuel mass movements

are in essence a desperate clinging to something that might give worth and meaning to futile, spoiled lives.<sup>36</sup> This article repurposes four of Hoffer's ideas to uncouple radical Islam from the engine of its own mass movement: offer a substitute movement (dangerous), encourage

small-group cohesion (potentially illiberal), target specific groups of people with financial stability and hope (quick but perhaps not long-lasting), and restructure emigration in a way that offers a release for the masses most at risk (global and long-reaching). ■

## Notes

1. Some notable opinions on this can be found in Bernard Lewis, *The Political Language of Islam* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988), 117n3; John L. Esposito, *The Islamic Threat: Myth or Reality?* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), 8; Natana J. DeLong-Bas, *Wahhabi Islam: From Revival and Reform to Global Jihad*, 1st ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), 228; Sadik J. al-Azm, "Islamic Fundamentalism Reconsidered: A Critical Outline of Problems, Ideas and Approaches," *South Asia Bulletin, Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East* 13, no. 1 and 2 (Spring/Fall 1993), 95–97.
2. Lee Keath and Hamza Hendawi, "How Islamic Is Islamic State Group? Not Very, Experts Say," Associated Press, 2 March 2015, accessed 14 May 2016, <https://www.yahoo.com/news/islamic-islamic-state-group-not-very-experts-131121264.html?ref=gs>.
3. Hamza Yusuf, who is at the forefront of scholarly Islamic criticism of the Islamic State ideology, suggests linking well (i.e., noncorrupt) representative governance to less marginalization by liberal elites of normative Islamic practices as a potential remedy. The second portion of this approach could work, because normative Islam bolsters rather than detracts from good governance (opposite of the Christian tradition in many ways). However, normative Islam is not particularly conducive to representative governance. See Sina Toossi and Yasmine Taeb, "Prominent Islamic Scholar Refutes Claims of ISIS's Links to Islam," Think Progress online, 5 March 2015, accessed 14 May 2016, <http://thinkprogress.org/world/2015/03/05/3630340/prominent-islamic-scholar-refutes-claims-isis-links-islam/>.
4. As an added bonus, by looking at the problem set from a nonreligious perspective, secular governments and institutions may be able to obviate the impulse toward joining or supporting such movements without those same governments and institutions having to engage in a religious debate they are ill equipped to win.
5. Eric Hoffer, *The True Believer: Thoughts on the Nature of Mass Movements* (New York: Harper Perennial, 2010).
6. *Ibid.*, xi. Suggestions from the other two portions of Hoffer's topical organization have been incorporated and referenced in this article, but for the sake of brevity and relevance, emphasis has been placed only on the first two sections. The next section covers Hoffer's theory for how mass movements inculcate united action and self-sacrifice; and finally, the last section enumerates the types of leaders necessary at the initial, fanatical, and practical phases of a mass movement's existence.
7. *Ibid.*, 6. While it seems Hoffer intended the Far East (China, Japan) rather than the Middle East as his "Orient," the general sentiment applies perhaps more strongly and presciently to the subject of this paper. This statement delves beyond a superficial "clash of cultures" into a more nuanced point, that Middle Eastern societies do not only envy the West's relative riches, but more regret the loss of prestige from the thousand-plus years where the Middle East was, more than Europe, a center of learning and progressiveness.
8. *Ibid.*, 11.
9. *Ibid.*, 12.
10. *Ibid.*, 51.
11. *Ibid.*, 25.
12. *Ibid.*, 38.
13. *Ibid.*, 17.
14. Associated Press, "Timeline: Daesh's Reign of Terror," Gulf News website, 18 June 2015, accessed 24 October 2016, <http://gulfnews.com/news/mena/iraq/timeline-daesh-s-reign-of-terror-1.1537224>.
15. Hoffer, *The True Believer*, 4.
16. *Ibid.*
17. *Ibid.*, 17.
18. *Ibid.*, 26.
19. Liz Sly, "The Hidden Hand Behind the Islamic State Militants? Saddam Hussein's," *Washington Post* website, 4 April 2015, accessed 24 April 2016, [https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/middle\\_east/the-hidden-hand-behind-the-islamic-state-militants-saddam-husseins/2015/04/04/aa97676c-cc32-11e4-8730-4f473416e759\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/middle_east/the-hidden-hand-behind-the-islamic-state-militants-saddam-husseins/2015/04/04/aa97676c-cc32-11e4-8730-4f473416e759_story.html).
20. Hoffer, *The True Believer*, 46.
21. Eli Lake, "Meet Iraq's Most Important Man," *New York Sun* website, 3 April 2007, accessed 14 May 2016, <http://www.nysun.com/opinion/meet-iraqs-most-important-man/51693/>.
22. Sly, "The Hidden Hand Behind the Islamic State Militants."
23. Pamela Engel, "One Reason Why Men Join ISIS Is Not Flattering for the 'Caliphate,'" *Business Insider* website, 5 October 2015, accessed 24 April 2016, <http://www.businessinsider.com/a-huge-reason-men-join-isis-is-not-flattering-for-the-caliphate-2015-10>.
24. Hoffer, *The True Believer*, 26.
25. *Ibid.*, 51.
26. Omar Sultan Haque et al., "Why Are Young Westerners Drawn to Terrorist Organizations like ISIS?" *Psychiatric Times* website, 10 September 2015, accessed 24 October 2016, <http://www.psychiatristimes.com/trauma-and-violence/why-are-young-westerners-drawn-terrorist-organizations-isis/page/0/2#sthash.u2IOB3bl.dpuf>.
27. Hoffer, *The True Believer*, 35.
28. *Ibid.*, 19.
29. *Ibid.*, 63. Here he clarifies further: "The capacity to resist coercion stems partly from the individual's identification with a group."
30. *Ibid.*, 19.
31. *Ibid.*
32. *Ibid.*, 33.
33. One such organization is the Sawab Center, accessed 24 October 2016, <http://www.sawabcenter.org>. See also France's "Plan d'action contre la radicalisation et le terrorisme," accessed 14 May 2016, <http://www.ville.gouv.fr/?plan-d-action-contre-la>.
34. Hoffer, *The True Believer*, 20.
35. *Ibid.*, 12.
36. *Ibid.*, 16.