

# INTELLIGENCE ȘI CULTURA DE SECURITATE

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**Ioana CHIȚĂ**

# TRACE: A STRUCTURED AI-SUPPORTED MODEL FOR CULTIC RISK AND NATIONAL SECURITY THREAT ASSESSMENT

Iancu-Marius BUFNEA\*

## Abstract:

*Understanding the structure, behavior, and risk level of organizations exhibiting cult characteristics is crucial for **defense, public order, and national security system structures, policymakers, and researchers**. The range of organizations that exhibit these characteristics ranges from non-violent ideological movements to extremely dangerous extremist groups. This paper aims to develop an initial, first stage **framework for assessing cult and national security risks**, by creating an innovative multidimensional model that integrates **psychological, organizational, and security** indicators to assess organizations that exhibit cult-like characteristics. This framework, at later stages, after solid and comprehensive trial and testing by both AI and human subjects, can be refined and perfected as well as adapted in order to suit the specific needs of various branches and departments concerned with public order and national security.*

*The difference between this academic effort and previous ones on the subject, which have taken into account in fragmentary and disparate evaluation elements such as psychological manipulation or leadership dynamics, is that this tool incorporates and integrates all these levels into a **quantitative and qualitative scoring system** to assess the level of potential threat of an organization **to national security**. This framework provides a first-stage to-be-tested structured method of distinguishing between **high-risk groups, such as ISIS and Hizb ut-Tahrir, and low-risk ideological movements, such as the LaRouche Movement and NXIVM**, by assessing factors such as **charismatic leadership, ideological rigidity, social control, financial dependency, and security threats**. Moreover, by establishing a concrete framework for qualitative and quantitative analysis, the process of collecting and analyzing information is thus facilitated, in particular by clearly identifying the **direction of collection**, as we will see.*

*The framework is applied to four distinct case studies: **ISIS**, a global terrorist network that supports violent jihad and seeks territorial control; **Hizb ut-Tahrir**, an Islamist organization that promotes a global caliphate without engaging in direct violence but encourages ideological radicalization; **The LaRouche Movement**, a nonviolent political organization known for its conspiracy theories and hierarchical structure; and **NXIVM**,*

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*a self-improvement group that developed into a system of exploitation. The results illustrate how **religious structures exist in different areas, but they have very different levels of risk. ISIS is approaching the maximum threshold, confirming its status as an existential security threat, while Hizb ut-Tahrir represents a latent risk through ideological radicalization. On the other hand, the LaRouche Movement and NXIVM, despite their internal coercive mechanisms, remain non-violent entities with minimal security implications for national security.***

*A significant advance in this study is the integration **of artificial intelligence (AI)**. AI can systematically process large amounts of data and assign preliminary scores based on **patterns, organizational behavior, and geopolitical impact**. However, the final evaluation and ranking of an organization **must remain a human-driven process**, in which **intelligence analysts critically evaluate the AI-generated ratings, validate the arguments behind the assigned scores, and ensure that ethical considerations are adhered to**. This approach aims to ensure both **efficiency and accuracy, while preventing the misclassification of non-violent groups**.*

*This study demonstrates the applicability of the framework **to various organizations**, providing **national security structures with a refined tool to assess, classify, and monitor risks and threats, while ensuring attention to ethical concerns**.*

**Keywords:** *national security, cults, analytical framework, OSINT, intelligence analysis.*

## **Introduction**

In order to facilitate the operative and conceptual reference to the model developed in this work, it will be hereinafter referred to by the acronym **T.R.A.C.E. (*Threat and Risk Assessment of Cultic Entities*)**. The T.R.A.C.E. framework proposes a structured, multidimensional methodology that quantifies the degree of danger associated with an organization by analyzing both psychological and ideological traits of a cultic type, as well as coercive organizational mechanisms and risk indicators with relevance to national security. This designation reflects the dual objective of the model:

- (1) identifying and ranking the level of internal risk, respectively
- (2) the estimation of the external threat that such an entity may pose to the constitutional order, institutional stability or security of the population.

Information analysis is a complex, time-consuming and demanding process for both the analyst and the operational team responsible for collecting, initial processing and transmitting data. Raw, unprocessed, and uncorrelated information needs to be transformed into actionable intelligence, but this analytical process poses many challenges.

From the very first stage of the analysis cycle, the right targeting of information collection is essential. If an organization shows

indications that it could pose a risk to national security or the constitutional order, it is crucial that the entire process – from collection to dissemination – takes place within a clear, well-defined and relevant framework.

Starting from this need, the present paper proposes a comprehensive analytical framework, applicable to organizations that present traits similar to cults and that may represent a threat to national security. Currently, there is no clear tool to differentiate between the level of risk associated with entities such as ISIS, which systematically resort to violence, and organizations that have not yet exhibited such overtly aggressive behaviors, such as the Antifa movement. This paper aims to contribute to filling this analytical gap. It is important to note from the outset that the proposed analysis focuses on factors that influence or have the potential to directly and significantly influence public safety component of national security, clearly distinguishing them from those that affect public order and safety only punctually or in the short term. To clarify this aspect, we mention the fact that within the specialized works, the concepts of national security, national defense and public order are included and incorporated into the field of national security (Măță 2016). We shall thus use the definition according to which national security, according to the national legislation of Romania, represents the state of legality, balance and social, economic and political stability necessary for the existence and development of the Romanian national state as a sovereign, unitary, independent and indivisible state, for the maintenance of the rule of law, as well as for the climate of unrestricted exercise of the fundamental rights, freedoms and duties of citizens, according to the democratic principles and norms established by the Constitution. (...) National security is achieved by knowing, preventing and removing internal or external threats that can harm the values provided (...) (Parlamentul României 2014). On the other hand, Public order, as a component part of national security, represents the state of legality, balance and peace, corresponding to a socially acceptable level of compliance with legal norms and civic behavior, including in the digital environment. It is maintained, ensured and restored in case of disturbance, by specific police measures (Guvernul României 2023). In other words, we refer to public safety as a strategic element or level of national security and to public order representing, in essence, its strategic-operational level, at least from the point of view of this paper which focuses on the first element, as mentioned. This approach allows for a more nuanced and focused assessment of potentially significant risks to essential state structures.

## Methodology

The TRACE framework is grounded in three complementary and well-established research traditions. The first concerns the study of cultic dynamics and coercive social control, which has documented mechanisms of thought reform, psychological manipulation, bounded choice, and dependency within closed groups (Lifton 1961) (Galanter 1999) (Lalich 2004) (Hassan 2015). The second draws on sociological and political analyses of charismatic leadership and hierarchical authority in insulated organizations, explaining how legitimacy, obedience, and internal discipline are constructed and maintained (Post 2014). The third integrates contemporary models of radicalization and violent extremism developed in security studies and intelligence analysis, which identify pathways through which ideological commitment, organizational structure, and grievance narratives translate into security threats (Horgan 2008) (Borum 2011).

The three analytical layers proposed in TRACE, namely basic cultic traits, coercive organizational practices, and national security risk indicators, represent a structured synthesis of these theoretical directions. The selected indicators reflect recurrent empirical patterns identified in historical studies of destructive cults and extremist movements, allowing TRACE to function as a coherent analytical architecture for examining organizations that combine ideological closure, internal coercion, and potential external destabilization.

First of all, in simple terms, it is important to mention that the intention of this paper is to provide specialists in the field of information analysis with a conceptual model that they can apply, after testing, refinement and adaptation, to a wide range of organizations that are the subject of an analytical approach. Thus, the analysis framework will be structured on three levels: ***cult-type characteristics, organizational practices, national security risk indicators***, each level having its specific evaluation criteria and a well-defined scoring range. Following the study of the characteristics and particularities of organizations such as *Peoples Temple*, led by Jim Jones; Manson Family, led by Charlie Manson; Aum Shinrikyo, led by Shoko Asahara; Fundamentalist Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints, led by Warren Jeffs; House of Dom Inácio de Loyola; Buddhafield, led by Jaime Gomez; Heaven's Gate, led by Marshall Applewhite; The Rajneesh (Osho) movement, led by Bhagwan Rajneesh and the Unification Church (Moonies), led by Sun Myung Moon, respectively, showed a number of such traits, each of which was assigned a possible score from 0 to the maximum specific to each category (6, 8 or 10 points), the maximum score total being 166 points, as follows:

**BASIC CULTIC TRAITS (PSYCHOLOGICAL AND IDEOLOGICAL) –  
MAXIMUM 45 POINTS:**

- **Absolute Charismatic Leader:** The central figure of the organization is considered infallible or the only legitimate source of truth.
- **Ideological exclusivism:** The organization claims to have the only correct interpretation of reality, and any different point of view is considered erroneous, dangerous or heretical.
- **Demonization of outsiders:** Anyone who criticizes or opposes the organization is considered an "enemy," "traitor," "heretic," or part of a conspiracy. In extreme cases, reference is made to the cosmogonic struggle subsumed by the Manichaeic dichotomy.
- **Sacrifice on behalf of the group:** Members are encouraged to put their organization above their own personal good, sometimes even to the point of extreme sacrifice (excessive work, self-destruction, violent acts).
- **Psychological manipulation:** The use of complex and advanced strategies and techniques of psychological manipulation through fear, guilt and social pressure to maintain loyalty to the group and its interests.
- **Isolation from external influences:** Discouraging or effectively prohibiting contact with family, friends, or sources of information that contradict the group's ideology.
- **Promoting an apocalyptic or messianic mission:** The organization claims to be fighting to save the world or prevent an impending disaster.
- **Rigid hierarchy structure:** Decisions are made exclusively by the leader or by a small circle of initiates, without democratic mechanisms.
- **Absolute dogmatism:** Group beliefs cannot be challenged; any doubt is severely sanctioned.

**ORGANIZATIONAL PRACTICES (CONTROL AND COMPLIANCE) –  
MAXIMUM 42 POINTS:**

- **Information control:** Members are exposed only to information approved by leaders, and access to other sources is discouraged or prohibited, sometimes even using the principle of *need-to-know* adapted to the group's operating framework.

- **"Us vs. them" dynamics:** The organization creates an artificial separation between members and "others" (state, society, family, etc.), which reinforces dependence on the group.
- **Financial exploitation:** Mandatory donations or taxes are requested, and financial resources are concentrated in the hands of leaders.
- **Behavioral uniformity:** Strict rules regarding clothing, language, lifestyle or accepted thinking in the group.
- **Inducing a sense of duty or guilt:** Members are forced to feel that they have to "pay" for belonging to the group.
- **Punishments for dissidents:** Excommunication, intimidation, public defamation or even violence against those who leave the organization.
- **Creating a system of internal oversight:** Members are encouraged to supervise and report to their colleagues.

#### **NATIONAL SECURITY RISK INDICATORS (VIOLENCE AND DESTABILIZATION) – MAXIMUM 79 POINTS:**

- **Active and manipulative recruitment:** The organization seeks to attract members who are vulnerable (or in a period of psychological or social vulnerability), often using insidious or manipulative persuasion techniques.
- **Rejection of state authority:** The group argues that the government is totally or partially illegitimate, and members are urged to ignore or undermine the authorities.
- **Creation of parallel governance structures:** The organization seeks to replace or suppress state institutions through its own rules and systems of justice or administrative-political nature.
- **Glorification of violence:** Whether through propaganda or direct actions, violence is presented as a legitimate and justified solution to achieve the group's goals.
- **Militarization and paramilitary training:** Organizing training camps or preparing members for armed confrontations and/or affiliated militarized entities or structures.
- **Attacks on opponents or critics:** Using threats, intimidation, or even physical aggression to silence critics or detractors.
- **Illegal or non-transparent funding:** The Group obtains its funds through opaque methods, including fraud, trafficking, or sponsorships that may be illegal.

- **Indoctrination for extreme actions:** Members are convinced that they must commit attacks or sacrifice themselves for the group's cause.

- **Clandestine and subversive activities:** Organizing illegal actions to destabilize the social order.

The scoring architecture of TRACE employs differentiated maximum values for individual indicators in order to reflect their unequal analytical relevance to security risk. Certain traits, such as glorification of violence, indoctrination for extreme actions, rejection of state authority, or paramilitary organization, are consistently identified in the security literature as direct predictors of destabilizing capacity and violent escalation (Borum 2011). These indicators therefore receive higher maximal weights. Other traits, such as behavioral uniformity or ritual rigidity, primarily describe internal group dynamics and receive lower maximal values, as their direct impact on national security is indirect or can be of significance only in conjunction with others.

This weighted approach prevents mechanical aggregation that would artificially inflate the influence of marginal variables and aligns the model with established multi-criteria risk assessment practices in criminology and intelligence analysis (Heuer Jr. 2007) (Monahan and Skeem 2015). TRACE thus balances descriptive completeness with analytical proportionality.

Thus, to recap, each organization analyzed receives a score based on three dimensions:

1. **Basic cultic traits** (*Leadership and psychology*): Maximum **45 points**;
2. **Organizational practices** (*Control & Compliance*): Maximum **42 points**;
3. **National security risk indicators** (*Violence and destabilization*): Maximum **79 points**;

Each trait is **ranked on a score scale from 0 to a maximum of 10**, where:

- **0 = Not present at all** (There is no clear evidence of this trait in the organization)
- **1-2 = Present in a weak form** (Isolated or undeveloped elements)
- **3-5 = Moderately present** (Occurs frequently, but is not required for all members)

- **6-8 = Strong presence** (It is one of the defining traits of the organization)
- **9-10 = Dominant** (The trait is a central element, essential for the functioning of the group)

In order to further detail and explain this methodology, we exemplify through the following tables, for each dimension analyzed:

### 1. BASIC CULTIC TRAITS (MAX: 45 POINTS)

TRAIT	EXPLANATION	POSSIBLE SCORE (1-6)
<b>Absolute charismatic leader</b>	The group revolves around an infallible figure, who controls decisions.	<b>0</b> (no leader) – <b>6</b> (absolute leader, awe)
<b>Ideological exclusivism</b>	The group claims to have the only "true" interpretation of reality.	<b>0</b> (accepts plurality) – <b>5</b> (only group ideology is valid)
<b>Demonization of outsiders</b>	The group considers critics to be enemies or part of a plot.	<b>0</b> (accepts criticism) – <b>5</b> (labels all opponents as malicious)
<b>Sacrifice on behalf of the group</b>	Members are encouraged to put their organization above their own good.	<b>0</b> (no sacrifice requests) – <b>5</b> (members are obliged to give up everything for the group)
<b>Psychological manipulation</b>	Using fear, guilt, and social pressure for loyalty.	<b>0</b> (no handling) – <b>6</b> (continuous handling)
<b>Isolation from external influences</b>	Members are discouraged from having contact with family, society or the independent press.	<b>0</b> (no restrictions) – <b>4</b> (complete isolation)
<b>Apocalyptic/Messianic Mission</b>	The group claims to be fighting to save the world or prevent a disaster.	<b>0</b> (no such ideas) – <b>6</b> (the group's mission is perceived as crucial for survival)

<b>Rigid hierarchical structure</b>	The group has a strict hierarchy where decisions are made by a small circle.	<b>0</b> (democratic structure) – <b>4</b> (absolute hierarchy, unopposed)
<b>Absolute dogmatism</b>	Any doubt is considered a betrayal.	<b>0</b> (Ideological flexibility) – <b>4</b> (Rigid doctrine, any deviation is punished)

## 2. ORGANIZATIONAL PRACTICES (MAX: 42 POINTS)

<b>TRAIT</b>	<b>EXPLANATION</b>	<b>POSSIBLE SCORE (1-8)</b>
<b>Information control</b>	Restricted (or hierarchical) access to information.	<b>0</b> (Open access) – <b>6</b> (Absolute control, prohibition of any external source)
<b>The "us vs. them" dynamic</b>	Artificial separation between group and society.	<b>0</b> (Open collaboration) – <b>7</b> (Total separation, the group sees society as an enemy)
<b>Financial exploitation</b>	Members are forced to contribute financially.	<b>0</b> (No mandatory contributions) – <b>6</b> (Seizure of personal property)
<b>Behavioral uniformity</b>	The group imposes strict rules of life.	<b>0</b> (No Code Enforced) – <b>7</b> (Full Uniformity)
<b>Inducing a sense of duty or guilt</b>	Constant emotional manipulation.	<b>0</b> (No pressure) – <b>8</b> (Heavily induced debt/guilt)
<b>Punishments for dissidents</b>	Members who intend to leave the group are threatened with punishment or retaliation.	<b>0</b> (Leaving is free) – <b>5</b> (Severe punishment, violence or intimidation)
<b>Creation of an internal surveillance system</b>	Members are required to spy on each other.	<b>0</b> (No such practices) – <b>3</b> (Severe supervision)

**3. NATIONAL SECURITY RISK INDICATORS (VIOLENCE AND DESTABILIZATION) - MAX: 79 POINTS**

<b>TRAIT</b>	<b>EXPLANATION</b>	<b>POSSIBLE SCORE (1-10)</b>
<b>Active and manipulative recruitment</b>	The group uses aggressive methods to attract members.	<b>0</b> (Open Recruitment) – <b>7</b> (Manipulative Methods/ Forced Recruitment)
<b>Rejection of state authority</b>	The group claims that the state is illegitimate.	<b>0</b> (Accepts the authority of the state) – <b>9</b> (Actively militates against the state)
<b>Creating parallel governance structures</b>	The group replaces the state with its own structures.	<b>0</b> (No alternative structures) – <b>8</b> (Total parallel governance)
<b>Glorification of violence</b>	Violence is considered a legitimate means.	<b>0</b> (Non-violent) – <b>10</b> (Active encouragement of violence)
<b>Militarization</b>	The group has paramilitary training.	<b>0</b> (No Military Aspect) – <b>8</b> (Armament and Active Training)
<b>Attacks on opponents</b>	The group uses violence against critics.	<b>0</b> (No such attacks) – <b>10</b> (Organized attacks)
<b>Illegal financing</b>	The group has opaque sources of income.	<b>0</b> (Full transparency) – <b>8</b> (Illegal financing, crime)
<b>Indoctrination for extreme actions</b>	Members are persuaded to commit attacks.	<b>0</b> (No such tactics) – <b>9</b> (Active indoctrination)
<b>Clandestine and subversive activities</b>	Organizing illegal actions against the state.	<b>0</b> (Legal activities) – <b>10</b> (Organized subversive operations)

**Final distribution of the score in the analysis framework**

Analyzed size	Number of traits	Maximum score per trait	Maximum total score
<b>1 . Basic cultic traits</b>	9	6	45
<b>2 . Organizational practices</b>	7	8	42
<b>3. National security risk indicators</b>	9	10	79
<b>MAXIMUM TOTAL</b>	25	6/ 8/ 10	166

The methodology of evaluation and interpretation of the score is based on the prior quantification of the score obtained on each level and on each feature. After applying the scores, the organizations are classified in a risk category, as follows:

FINAL SCORE	RISK LEVEL
0 - 40	○ Minimal/non-existent risk
41 - 90	○ Cultic, but low risk
91 - 120	◐ Moderate risk
121 - 149	◑ High risk
150 - 166	● Imminent risk / existential danger

The organizations analyzed through this methodological framework are then classified into one of five risk levels, each reflecting the degree of threat that the entity may pose to national security, in particular to the security component. Depending on the score obtained, recommendations can be made on the necessary measures from the institutions with responsibilities in the field of national security and public order.

At the first level of risk, corresponding to a score between 0 and 40 points, the organization is classified as representing a minimal or non-existent risk. It may have some marginal or latent cultic features, but it does not present elements of coercive control over members, does not promote extremist ideological views and does not adopt practices that could have a destabilizing impact on society, the state or the constitutional and legal order. In such cases, it is not necessary for the

security institutions to intervene directly, but it is necessary to maintain a discreet and adequate level of passive monitoring in order to detect possible developments that could indicate a change in the dynamics of the group or its associated practices. Moreover, if it is found that an organization falls into one of these risk levels, whatever it may be, it is mandatory that the entity be constantly monitored in order to identify indicators that point toward a potential transition to a higher level of risk.

The second level of risk, in the range of 41-90 points, includes organizations that have a moderate degree of cultic influence, but do not directly pose an imminent danger to national security. These entities may exhibit forms of control over members and adopt exclusivist rhetoric, but without resorting to violence or illegal activities. In this context, the strategy of discreet surveillance of security institutions must focus on monitoring public discourse, recruitment channels and possible developments that could lead to radicalization.

In the case of a score between 91 and 120 points, the organization is considered to have a moderate risk to national security. It can manifest tendencies of isolation from society, can use advanced techniques of psychological manipulation on members and can begin to openly reject the authority of the state, whether it is jurisdiction from a legal point of view or manifested against public officials or dignitaries. This category can also include groups that, although they do not directly resort to violence, encourage and/or issue discourses that justify hostile or destabilizing actions against state institutions, certain segments of the population or civil society. In such situations, the authorities must take proactive measures, including active surveillance, investigating sources of funding and assessing the risk of radicalization of members, so as to be able to prevent an escalation of the group's activities. At this stage, it is very likely that the entity itself or certain members of it have committed or have a manifest intention to commit acts that constitute a criminal offence. Thus, the measure of applying special methods of supervision or investigation, as specified and defined by the Code of Criminal Procedure of 2010 (LAW no. 135/2010), Chapter IV, art. 138, may be ordered immediately, namely:

- (1) The following are special methods of surveillance or research:
  - a) interception of communications or any type of distance communication;
  - b) access to a computer system;
  - c) video, audio or photographic surveillance;

- d) locating or tracking by technical means;
- e) obtaining data on the financial transactions of a person;
- f) detaining, handing over or searching postal items;
- g) the use of undercover investigators and collaborators;
- h) authorized participation in certain activities;
- i) supervised delivery;
- j) obtaining traffic and location data processed by providers of public electronic communications networks or providers of electronic communications services intended for the public

Here, we mention that such surveillance measures can obviously also be ordered at lower levels of risk, in compliance with all the legal norms in force, when there is reasonable suspicion about the commission of serious crimes. Also, these methods are provided by way of example, extracted from the national legislation in Romania, being considered appropriate and relevant since most European states or part of the North Atlantic alliance have adopted legislative elements similar to them. These methods are salutary starting with this level of risk, as organizations classified on one of the higher levels have the potential to implement actions that can lead to serious disturbances of peace and public order or even of the constitutional order, representing particularly serious crimes, resulting in extended custodial sentences. We mention, in this regard, the provisions of Article 397 of the Criminal Code, namely:

(1) Armed action undertaken for the purpose of changing the constitutional order or hindering or hindering the exercise of state power shall be punished with imprisonment from 15 to 25 years and the prohibition of exercising certain rights.

(2) Undertaking violent actions against persons or property committed by several persons together, in order to change the constitutional order or to hinder or hinder the exercise of state power, if national security is endangered, shall be punished with imprisonment from 10 to 20 years and the prohibition of exercising certain rights.

When the score obtained falls between 121 and 149 points, the organization is defined as having a high risk to national security. It adopts internal coercive structures, actively opposes state institutions, and may have the capacity to mobilize significant human and material resources for subversive actions. Groups in this category also generally exhibit an advanced degree of control over members, imposing drastic penalties on dissidents and resorting to practices that may include aggressive recruitment and the accumulation of resources for illegal purposes.

Security institutions must implement firm measures, including constant monitoring of group leaders, discovering and dismantling support networks and, where legislation allows, initiating concrete legal actions to prevent imminent risks.

The last level of risk, corresponding to a score between 150 and 166 points, signals an extreme and immediate threat to national security. Organizations in this category usually function as clandestine entities, consisting of paramilitary structures, illicit sources of funding and radical rhetoric that can lead to terrorist actions or violent acts against the state and the population. In such cases, the responsible institutions must take urgent measures, including counterintelligence operations, group infiltration, dismantling support networks and, where necessary, direct intervention through law enforcement.

International cooperation can also be key to tackling these groups, especially if they have cross-border links and external sources of funding.

Numerical scoring alone cannot, by any means, capture the complexity of organizational dynamics or their security implications. TRACE therefore incorporates an interpretative layer in which score distributions across analyzed entities are examined comparatively. This enables identification of structural patterns differentiating violent extremist organizations, latent ideological networks, and coercive but non-political cultic entities. The interpretation focuses on how combinations of cultic intensity, organizational coercion, and security-oriented behaviors interact to produce distinct risk profiles.

This approach corresponds to contemporary multi-level threat assessment frameworks used for analyzing hybrid non-state actors, where qualitative interpretation remains essential for extracting analytical meaning from quantitative indicators (Schmid 2013) (Schmid 2013). TRACE thus operates not only as a classificatory mechanism, but as a proposed structured lens for understanding how specific organizational architectures translate into differentiated security risks.

## **APPLICATION OF THE T.R.A.C.E FRAMEWORK TO SPECIFIC CASES**

As mentioned in the introduction, one of the novelty and innovation elements proposed by TRACE is the integration of Artificial Intelligence within the information analysis process, in order to assess the degree of danger and threat to the national security of some organizations. To exemplify, we will use the ChatGPT tool from Open AI,

the paid version, version 4.0. Thus, it will be requested to effectively apply the TRACE model for four organizational structures, about which it will collect information only from OSINT open sources. Thus, in the case of real-life analyses, the intelligence analyst will be able to either ask the model for the same actions, or personally enter the raw data and information collected as part of specific missions, asking the model to perform the preliminary analysis, and then critically evaluate the AI's assumptions and conclusions, in order to deliver an analysis that is as accurate and viable as possible.

The advantage of using this model is evident even when information cannot be obtained from open sources, the analyst having to rely exclusively on classified information collected by the operative teams. In this scenario, the analyst's work is facilitated by the fact that, from the direction phase of information collection, he is provided with a template with clear lines of action.

To exemplify the scenario mentioned above, let's assume that an institutional client – receiver and beneficiary of the intelligence product requests a certain intelligence service as the Primary Intelligence Requirement to find out whether or not the ISIS group represents a threat to national security. In this case, in the absence of a directive model, the analyst must make an additional effort, often time-consuming – which can in itself represent an additional danger, to establish Secondary and Tertiary Intelligence requirements (IRs), without having a structured guiding path. On the other hand, by using the TRACE model, the analyst already has the premises of the general direction for collecting information about ISIS, which can be used directly as Secondary IRs, the analyst only having to add Tertiary IRs, if necessary. Also, by using this model, the elaboration of the Intelligence Collection Plan (ICP) is significantly facilitated, and even the sources and methods of collection (OSINT, HUMINT, SIGINT, IMINT, etc.) can be more easily established.

Moreover, given the cognitive biases inherent in human psychology, through the existence of a clear qualitative and quantitative analysis framework, the subjective approach on the part of both the analyst and the operative teams is avoided as much as possible. In-depth studies in the field categorically support this approach, the author of the interpretation according to which major intelligence failures are usually caused by failures of analysis, not failures of collection (Heuer Jr. 1999, 65), supports the creation of standard models of information analysis that provide as few possibilities for error on the part of the analyst as

possible, by avoiding and raising awareness of cognitive biases. Heuer conceives and proposes the Analysis of Competing Hypotheses (ACH) as a structured analytical method created by him within the CIA, designed to help analysts avoid cognitive biases and make more rational decisions under conditions of uncertainty. The TRACE model complements and enhances the Analysis of Competing Hypotheses (ACH) method by providing a coherent framework for structuring assumptions, categorizing information and quantifying risks. Through its three levels (cultic traits, organizational practices and risk indicators), TRACE facilitates the formulation of comparable hypotheses in the ACH, reduces the ambiguity of the qualitative assessment and introduces a quantitative dimension that allows the prioritization of hypotheses on an objective basis. Thus, TRACE functions as an analytical filter that supports the selection and testing of hypotheses in a systematic way, reducing the influence of cognitive biases and ensuring the logical consistency of analytical reasoning.

Thus, we can apply the TRACE model in order to establish the degree of risk represented by ISIS, the analysis carried out by AI, exclusively based on OSINT, being as follows:

**"Basic Cultic Traits (Leadership and Psychology) - ISIS Total Score: 45/45 (maximum)**

- 1. Absolute Charismatic Leader – Score: 6/6.** ISIS organized around a leader with the status of an infallible "Caliph". Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi was revered as the sole legitimate authority, with his cult of personality dominating the group (rand.org). Oaths of allegiance were made first to Baghdadi, then to ISIS (rand.org), indicating his central and undeniable role.
- 2. Ideological exclusivism – Score: 5/5.** ISIS ideology proclaims that it holds **the only** "correct" interpretation of Islam, qualifying all other views as erroneous or heretical. As part of jihadist Salafism, ISIS has an *exclusivist* view that one's own version of Islam is the only authentic one, justifying violence against other Muslims through takfir (accusation of apostasy) (brookings.edu). In other words, anyone who does not adhere to the ISIS doctrine is considered an infidel.
- 3. Demonizing outsiders – Score: 5/5.** ISIS systematically labels critics and external categories as *diabolical enemies*. Shiites, for example, are declared apostates guilty of religious

"innovation", a crime that in ISIS's view deserves death (theatlantic.com). The organization has an explicit Manichaeic view of the world, dividing it into two camps – *us vs. them*, believers vs. non-believers – in which anyone who does not join them is an enemy worthy of destruction (philosophersmag.com). This perspective rhetorically justifies a "cosmic war" against all outsiders.

4. **Sacrifice on behalf of the group – Score: 5/5.** ISIS glorifies **martyrdom** and encourages its members to give their lives for the group's "cause." The group's propaganda *industrialized martyrdom*, widely using suicide bombers and suicide bombers as military tactics (theguardian.com). Between 2015–2016, ISIS carried out more than 900 suicide attacks in a single year, treating the deaths of its members as a heroic sacrifice and rewarded religious sacrifice (theguardian.com). This culture of supreme sacrifice shows that the followers of ISIS were ready to give up their own lives for the group (considering that they were either achieving earthly victory or the "paradise" of the martyrs).
5. **Psychological manipulation – Score: 6/6.** ISIS has used fear, guilt, and social pressure as deliberate tools to control members. For example, after suffering territorial losses, ISIS threatened its *defectors* through video messages, accusing them of treason and warning them with divine and land punishments if they left the fight (jns.orgins.org). Such tactics – the threat of damnation in the afterlife or immediate execution – maintained obedience through terror. At the same time, ISIS inculcates guilt in potential Muslim recruits by suggesting that if they do not join the Caliphate, they are committing a grave sin against the faith.
6. **Isolation from external influences – Score: 4/4.** In the controlled territories, ISIS has imposed an almost total isolation of the population and members from the outside world, *cutting off access to independent information*. In Mosul, for example, he banned satellite television and destroyed satellite dishes, claiming that images of "infidels" "*brainwash*" Muslims (washingtonpost.com, washingtonpost.com). Also in Raqqa, ISIS banned **internet at home** and closed most internet cafes (theguardian.com). The goal was to block foreign news and prevent contact with outside family or friends, keeping members in a propaganda-controlled "information bubble."

- 7. Apocalyptic/Messianic Mission – Score: 6/6.** ISIS's rhetoric is profoundly apocalyptic. The group claims that it fights according to end-time prophecies, considering itself a key agent of the coming apocalypse (theatlantic.com). ISIS ideologues frequently referred to the prophecy of the final battle of Dabiq against the "Romans" (Westerners) and the imminent coming of the global caliphate. This messianic vision gave the members a sense of **sacred mission**, presenting their war as necessary for the salvation of Islam and the establishment of divine order on earth.
- 8. Rigid hierarchical structure – Score: 4/4.** ISIS had a strict internal hierarchy with no democratic mechanisms or internal contestation. All major decisions were made by Baghdadi and his select council (Shura/Delegate Committee), which ensured unified command over the entire territory. After the declaration of the Caliphate, ISIS created central institutions (e.g. *Administration of the Distant Provinces*) precisely to maintain **command of the leadership from the center** over the new occupied territories (ctc.westpoint.edu). Thus, global expansion was also governed by a hard core, directly loyal to the leader. There was no consultation of the rank-and-file members; on the contrary, military discipline and obedience were absolute.
- 9. Absolute dogmatism – Score: 4/4.** ISIS's beliefs and rules were dogmatically imposed, any deviation being met with **Extreme retaliation**. The group instituted a regime of terror in which *any criticism or doubt* to doctrine was equivalent to treason. Through *City Documents* (2014), ISIS codified the obligations of life in the Caliphate and listed severe punishments – from amputation and stoning to execution – for deviations from the imposed religious line (institute.global). Basically, it governed through fear: the population quickly understood that the strict non-compliance with ISIS dogmas (such as the prohibition of smoking, music, the imposition of prayers on time, etc.) entails brutal punishments, sometimes filmed and publicly exposed, for example (theguardian.comtheguardian.com). This **Total intolerance** Compared to any other perspectives, it cemented a climate in which no one dared to challenge the dogmas of the organization.

**Organizational Practices (Control and Compliance) – ISIS**  
**Total Score: 42/42**

- 1. Information Control – Score: 6/6.** ISIS exercised almost total control over the information to which members and the population had access. The organization **censored** any external sources: it banned unapproved TV shows and newspapers, blocked the internet uncontrollably, and used only its own media channels for propaganda. In Raqqa, for example, *all* private internet connections were banned, and most internet cafés were closed (theguardian.com). In Mosul, ISIS seized and destroyed locals' TV antennas to prevent them from watching foreign news or entertainment (washingtonpost.com). The goal was to isolate the community under an "information barrage" and ensure that members only receive **messages approved by ISIS**, safe from the "lies of infidels."
- 2. "Us vs. Them" Dynamic – Score: 7/7.** From the beginning, ISIS has cultivated a total artificial separation between *ISIS community* and the rest of the world. The organization's discourse clearly demarcated the camp of the righteous believers (the mujahideen of the Caliphate) from the mass of "infidels" – be they local governments, Westerners or even Muslims who did not join them. This binary view of society – the world divided between good and evil – has been used to reinforce the addiction of followers to the group. ISIS has instilled in its members the idea that the Iraqi and Syrian state, and indeed the entire international order, are illegitimate and hostile to Islam. Through this rhetoric, *Exclusive loyalty* towards the group was encouraged, any links with "the others" being suspect. Analyses indicate that ISIS was imposing its authority and internal cohesion through **Terror and a dualistic vision** – society is either with ISIS (good) or against ISIS (bad) (institute.global). In this climate, members come to regard even former friends or family (outside the Caliphate) as potential enemies, reinforcing the break with the external society.
- 3. Financial exploitation – Score: 6/6.** ISIS financed its "state" largely on the backs of the captive population, through **forced taxes, looting and confiscations** for the benefit of the leaders. Estimates show that about *half* of ISIS's revenue came from *taxing and extorting* local businesses and confiscating the

property of the subjugated (theguardian.com). The group imposed various forms of payment: from zakat (mandatory Islamic giving) and commercial transaction taxes, to absurd fines (for example, those who could not answer questions in the Qur'an were fined) (theguardian.com). In addition, ISIS robbed banks (in Mosul, it stole millions of dollars) and forcibly took over natural resources (oil fields, agricultural crops). All these funds were centralized non-transparently in the organization's treasury, financing the war machine and enriching the upper hierarchy. Basically, under ISIS domination, the population was systematically plundered, **without any public accountability of the leaders** regarding the use of money.

4. **Behavioral uniformity – Score: 7/7.** Daily life under ISIS was regulated down to the smallest detail, imposing a *single code of conduct* for all. Attire, speech, religious rituals, and even daily activities were strictly controlled. Women, for example, were required to wear *black full-face garments (niqab)* and could not go out unaccompanied. Men had to have beards according to Salafist norms and were forbidden to wear "Western" clothes. ISIS *banned cigarette* and hookah smoking, declared music illegal, and abolished all "non-religious" entertainment (theguardian.com). It also *imposed participation in daily prayers*: in Raqqa, taxi drivers were forbidden to work during prayer, and those caught not going to the mosque were punished (theguardian.com). Any offense – no matter how small, such as listening to music at home – was punished by public beatings, imprisonment or even exemplary executions. This forced leveling of behaviors created an almost totalitarian environment, in which individuals *suppressed their personalities* for fear of reprisals, automatically conforming to the group's rules.
5. **Inducing a sense of duty/guilt – Score: 8/8.** ISIS propaganda has intensively cultivated the idea that *every Muslim has a religious duty* to support the Caliphate – either by emigrating to ISIS territory, or by financial support or at least by declared loyalty. The group's ideologues preached that *Hijra* (migration to the Islamic State) is an **individual obligation** for believers. "[ISIS] doctrine requires believers to live in the Caliphate if possible" (theatlantic.com), notes Graeme Wood. Thus, those

who hesitated to join were made to feel guilty – as if they were betraying their religion by refusing the "true Islamic State". ISIS also offered potential recruits options to contribute: if they did not want to or could not fight, they were asked **for material support** – donations of money, equipment, help for the families of the "martyrs", etc. (gmfus.org). This manipulative approach lowered the barrier to entry into the organization: people felt that at least they had to "do something" for the cause of ISIS, otherwise they carry the burden of the sin of abandoning their Muslim brothers (gmfus.org). Essentially, ISIS has succeeded in turning participation in jihad (active or passive) into a *moral norm* so that members feel permanently beholden to the group and guilty if they do not contribute enough.

6. **Punishments for dissidents – Score: 5/5.** Leaving or betraying ISIS was considered capital crimes. The organization instituted cruel punishments – from *public executions* to **media lynching** – against any member who showed signs of dissent. Hundreds of real or supposed deserters were killed as an example. In 2014, for example, ISIS *executed ~150 members of the Sunni Albu Nimr tribe* who had resisted it, dumping their bodies in a ditch in Ramadi (theguardian.com). Those caught trying to flee the group's cities were also summarily "judged" as traitors – "*whoever flees is considered an apostate,*" warned ISIS, which had instituted *a ban on leaving* the Caliphate without permission (theguardian.com). Even high-ranking members suspected of plotting were eliminated (sometimes filmed to discourage others). In addition to physical violence, ISIS resorted to intimidation and defamation: it publicly called the disloyal "hypocrites" (munafiq) and threatened them with torment in the afterlife (jns.orgjns.org). In conclusion, the fear of extreme punishment has made *it almost impossible to leave ISIS*, thus keeping members captive in the organization.
7. **Creation of an internal surveillance system – Score: 3/3.** ISIS has developed an effective internal network of *Espionage and control*, designed to prevent betrayal or plots. There was a special security unit (Amniyat) that infiltrated informants among the fighters and the population, reporting any deviations or criticisms. Members were tacitly encouraged to keep an eye on their comrades and even their families, knowing that **everyone** could inform management of their loyalty.

According to research, after 2014 ISIS formalized counterintelligence structures to protect its *monitor its own activists and leaders*, applying strict discipline to them (institute.global). For example, if a commander was suspected of corruption or ideological deviation, he was immediately investigated by the caliphate's emissaries. This climate of permanent suspicion ensures compliance: *Anyone knew he could be tracked*. In addition, ISIS implemented "religious police" (Hisba) patrols that checked everyone in cities for compliance with the rules and recruited locals as informants. Through this ubiquitous surveillance system, **any thought of opposition was quickly discouraged**, the members becoming themselves guardians of the regime for fear of being denounced by others.

### **National Security Risk Indicators (Violence and Destabilization) – ISIS Total Score: 79/79**

- 1. Active and manipulative recruitment – Score: 7/7.** ISIS has carried out one of the most aggressive and sophisticated recruitment campaigns in the history of terrorist groups. Unlike the old al-Qaeda (which recruited slowly and selectively), ISIS *revolutionized recruitment tactics*, combining **modern online propaganda** with traditional methods of persuasion (gmfus.org). The organization leveraged social media, video platforms, and forums to reach a global audience of potential supporters in record time. ISIS's messages were carefully calibrated psychologically: first, the recruit was instilled with mental support for the Caliphate (legitimacy and obligation to support it) – without being directly asked for immediate violent action (gmfus.org). Through propaganda videos and online magazines (Dabiq, Rumiya), ISIS *romanticized* life in the Caliphate and the jihadist cause, presenting it as a heroic and meaningful adventure. At the same time, it hid the cruel aspects, initially avoiding calling for attacks or suicide missions, precisely to **lower the moral barrier** of hesitant recruits (gmfus.org). Once sympathy was earned, ISIS moved on to stage *two*: it conveyed to new followers that it was time to prove loyalty – either by migrating to Syria/Iraq or by acting in their countries. This two-step strategy, along with the intense use of emotions (the humiliations

suffered by Muslims, the call for revenge, the promise of glory and "brotherhood"), allowed ISIS to recruit tens of thousands of followers from all over the world in a very short time (gmfus.or, ggmfus.org). Many of them were vulnerable young people, seduced by the clever propaganda of ISIS that promised them identity and purpose.

2. **Rejection of state authority – Score: 9/9.** ISIS has openly and violently challenged the legitimacy of any existing state, proclaiming that *the only legitimate authority* is their theocratic Caliphate. The group urged its members and supporters **not to recognize the laws or governments** of their home countries. At its peak, ISIS erased the official border between Syria and Iraq – in 2014 it blew up border crossings and declared the "end of the Sykes-Picot era" (aljazeera.com), i.e. the arbitrary cancellation of borders established by colonial powers. This symbolic gesture was accompanied by intense rhetoric: ISIS called modern states in the Middle East "*illegitimate constructs*" and their governments – apostate, corrupt or puppets of the West. For example, it proclaimed *the "Caliphate"* in the conquered territories, claiming its exclusive sovereignty and asking the Muslim community to obey it at the expense of all other loyalties. In the controlled territories, ISIS completely eliminated the institutions of the previous states: the administration, courts and law enforcement of the Syrian and Iraqi governments were either destroyed or seized. Through such actions, ISIS sought to undermine the existing state order – both locally (through rebellion and the establishment of its own government) and globally (by inviting followers abroad to civil disobedience). The statements of its ideologues make it clear that "*worldly governments*" have no authority – "*Allah is sovereign, not the laws of men*" was a motto – so members had to ignore or destroy the laws of "taghut" (worldly tyrants). This refusal of any secular authority has turned ISIS into a direct threat to the sovereignty of states in the region and beyond.
3. **Creating parallel governance structures – Score: 8/8.** In the conquered areas, ISIS replaced or suppressed state institutions with **its own administrative and legal apparatus**, establishing a totalitarian type of government. The group divided the territory into *wilaya* (province) according to the Islamic historical model and appointed governors (*wali*) and

kadis sharia in each. He established *Sharia Courts* which eliminated the pre-existing civil courts, judging everything according to their radical interpretation of Islamic law. It also organized *Police force* (Hisba – morality police, and military internal security force) who took the place of the regular police, constantly patrolling and enforcing the group's rules. ISIS created **diwans (government departments)** specialized – from Diwan al-Ta'lim (Education), which dictated the Islamist school curriculum and took out "non-Islamic" subjects, to Diwan al-Sihha (Health), which managed hospitals, or Diwan al-Zakat, which collected taxes and distributed part of it as pseudo-social aid. These structures were meant to make the Caliphate function as a full-fledged state. The organization has also issued identity documents and certificates (e.g., marriage certificates under the ISIS seal), set up its own markets, and even tried minting a currency (the ISIS gold and silver dinar). "*City Documents*" 2014, distributed to residents, practically served as a **constitution** of the Caliphate, setting out the obligations of citizens and the corresponding punishments (institute.global). All these mechanisms demonstrated that ISIS was not only a terrorist group, but aspired to the quality of *quasi-state entity*: it suppressed the legitimate state administration and put in its place its own theocratic system of government, subordinate to the jihadist command.

4. **Glorification of violence – Score: 10/10.** Extreme violence was not only practiced, but also *Celebrated openly* by ISIS as a legitimate and even desired tool for achieving its goals. The group's official propaganda abounds in images of cruelty elevated to the rank of virtue: executions filmed in detail, public beheadings, burning alive, throwing from buildings – all presented as *Vigilante shows* meant to frighten enemies and inspire followers. ISIS inherited from its predecessor in Iraq (Zarqawi's group) *proclivity for violence and its glorification* (bearworks.missouristate.edu). For example, after the impact of beheading videos began to wane, ISIS innovated even more shocking methods: it broadcast a video in which a prisoner Jordanian pilot was burned alive in a cage, justifying barbarism as "legal" punishment and a triumph of faith (reutersinstitute.politics.ox.ac.uk). At the same time, propaganda

combines cruel images with *Complimentary messages*: fighters who commit acts of extreme violence are presented as heroes, "lions of Islam" who bring divine justice. Even social media channels that recruited young people displayed, along with bloody pictures, posts describing *Romanticized Adventures and Rewards* for those in ISIS (jnslp.com) – associating violence with enthusiasm and glory. Thus, ISIS's organizational culture normalized and encouraged gratuitous violence: mass executions were proudly announced, suicide bombings were called "*Martyrdom operations*" and celebrated in songs (nashid). In essence, ISIS has turned violence into a *brand of terror* – a central means of communicating its power – and in a value in itself, suggesting to followers that ruthless cruelty is not only allowed, but even **virtuous** in the service of the cause (institute.global). This glorification of violence fueled the rapid radicalization and atrocious behavior of the members, constituting a clear indicator of the danger that the group represented.

- 5. Militarization and paramilitary training – Score: 8/8.** ISIS organized as an irregular army-type military force, investing heavily in *the combat training* of its members, including children. The group set up dozens of **training camps** where recruits were trained in weapons handling, guerrilla tactics and religious indoctrination. Images released by ISIS show cohorts of youths in uniform, running on shooting ranges or firing Kalashnikov under the supervision of instructors. Child soldiers ("Caliphate Dogs") were also trained in these camps – a well-documented phenomenon, from *public executions committed by minors* to Qur'anic memorization competitions followed by military exercises (ctc.westpoint.edu). Between 2014 and 2016, ISIS increasingly routinely integrated *children and adolescents onto the battlefield*, using them as engineers, spies or suicide bombers, according to CTC West Point (ctc.westpoint.edu ctc.westpoint.edu) reports. In addition, ISIS has seized huge amounts of weaponry (tanks, artillery, armored vehicles) from the Syrian and Iraqi armies and has formed structured paramilitary units (full of experienced fighters, including former Baathist officers). At its peak, ISIS had *tens of thousands of* armed fighters, organized into

brigades and battalions, coordinated by a central command. This intense militarization allowed them to carry out classic offensives (such as the siege of Kobane) and maintain *territorial control* over a vast area for several years. Basically, ISIS has behaved like a professional jihad army: it has systematically trained fighters (local and foreign), equipped them with heavy weaponry and used them in both conventional and unconventional terrorist operations. The ability to operate as a disciplined military force has made ISIS particularly dangerous, far exceeding the usual level of an insurgent group.

- 6. Attacks on opponents or critics – Score: 10/10.** ISIS has resorted to *assassinations and massacres* to silence any opponents, whether individuals or entire groups. Targets have included local journalists, anti-ISIS activists, tribal leaders who refused to obey them, rival Muslim clerics and, of course, members of the security forces or politicians of states in the region. The modus operandi was extremely brutal, meant not only to eliminate a critical voice, but also to send a message to the terror of the surrounding community. A notorious example: in the summer of 2014, the Sunni tribe Al-Shaitat in eastern Syria revolted against the occupation of ISIS; In retaliation, the jihadists executed **nearly 700 members** of the tribe (including civilians) in a series of filmed massacres, leaving their bodies exposed for days (en.wikipedia.org). Similarly, in Iraq, ISIS killed hundreds of members of the Albu Nimr tribe, known for opposing extremists – in a single mass grave in Ramadi 150 bodies of the tribe were found, all *shot for daring to confront ISIS* (theguardian.com). Citizen journalists from the group "Raqqa is Being Slaughtered Silently" who documented ISIS abuses were hunted down and murdered, some even in refuge in Turkey. ISIS has also issued *death sentence fatwas* for public figures who have criticized them: for example, it has claimed responsibility for the killing of moderate Muslim clerics labeled "apostates" for condemning the group's violence. Through such actions, ISIS demonstrated that it **does not tolerate even the slightest opposition**: any critical voice was met with threats and, very often, physical elimination. The terror established made many locals or even potential internal

dissidents not dare to express themselves. In conclusion, ISIS's strategy of *exterminating its opponents* – often publicly – confirms the extreme level of risk it represents: an actor who consolidates his power through localized genocide and the *export of assassinations* (including attacks in Paris, Istanbul, etc. against those perceived as "enemies of ISIS").

- 7. Illegal or non-transparent funding – Score: 8/8.** ISIS's sources of funding have been largely **illicit and opaque**, violating national and international laws. Half of the revenue, as mentioned, came from *taxes and forced confiscations* – basically institutionalized extortion (theguardian.com). In addition, ~43% came from smuggling stolen oil (theguardian.com): ISIS seized oil fields in eastern Syria and northern Iraq, artisanally refined the crude oil and sold it on the black market (sometimes with the complicity of cross-border criminal networks). This oil trafficking violated embargoes and directly financed terrorism. Other clandestine funding activities included: **trafficking in antiquities** (archaeological pieces looted from ancient sites – e.g. Palmyra – illegally sold on international markets), **kidnappings for ransom** (kidnapped Western journalists and aid workers, some released for millions), human **trafficking** (including the sale of Yazidi women as slaves) and hidden donations from radical private sponsors in the Gulf region. All these financial flows were unreported, managed exclusively by the ISIS leadership through secret cashiers. Basically, the group operated as a criminal underground economy: it obtained money through organized crime, evaded the international financial system (using cash, gold or cryptocurrencies) and did not account to anyone for spending these funds. The opacity was so great that, even after the collapse of the territorial Caliphate, the authorities have difficulty in tracking where the accumulated money reserves disappeared (it is suspected that they were hidden to finance the post-caliphate clandestine networks). In conclusion, the **deeply illegal nature** of ISIS's finances – based on looting, smuggling and trafficking – highlights its character as a global criminal actor and the associated risk of the proliferation of black economies and cross-border corruption.

**8. Indoctrination for extreme actions – Score: 9/9.** ISIS has not been content to passively recruit followers, but has *actively indoctrinated them* to commit acts of extreme violence and terrorist attacks, including at the cost of their own lives. The group's propaganda contains numerous *explicit calls to action*: Abu Mohammad al-Adnani, the spokesman, urged Western sympathizers in 2014 to carry out attacks at home if they cannot reach Syria – *"kill the infidels however you can, with a car, with a knife, poison them."* ISIS has managed to convince thousands of young people to become **"lone wolves"** and strike in their countries. Basically, he turned extremist violence into a *civic duty* for his nonsensical supporters: "the call of ISIS – especially to Muslims in the West – promotes violence as an individual decision and a civic obligation" (brookings.edu). At the same time, in the controlled territories, the younger generation was systematically educated to hate and attack the "enemies of Islam". In ISIS-run schools, textbooks were replaced with versions that glorified violent jihad; Children were accustomed to guns from an early age and sent to attend public executions to *desensitize* them. Many teenagers have been persuaded to enlist as suicide bombers – they have been promised paradise and told that *there is no more honorable deed* than to detonate yourself in the midst of "enemies of Allah". The result of this brainwashing: horrible attacks committed with fanaticism. Examples: the minor who blew himself up at a pop concert in Manchester (2017) or the radicalized families in Sri Lanka who blew themselves up in churches (2019) – all inspired by ISIS propaganda. Moreover, adult members of ISIS were also under continuous pressure to prove devotion through extreme acts. Defectors reported that during training, they were asked to *kill unarmed prisoners* to test their loyalty and eliminate their empathy. In short, ISIS created an environment in which *indoctrination to the ultimate violence* was the norm: it managed to turn ordinary people into suicide bombers and executioners, convinced that this way they were fulfilling their religious destiny. This indicator directly reflects the terrorist danger that ISIS has posed globally.

**9. Clandestine and subversive activities – Score: 10/10.** Even after the loss of territories, ISIS proved a high capacity to operate **clandestinely** and destabilize states through underground networks. The group created a specialized "*external operations*" unit, designed to plan and execute terrorist attacks outside the areas it controlled (abcnews.go.com). This secret department (known as *Emni*) was responsible for coordinating major attacks such as those in Paris (Nov. 2015) and Brussels (2016). Western officials confirmed that ISIS had a dedicated structure for attacks in the West, separate from the Syria-Iraq front (abcnews.go.com, abcnews.go.com). These conspiracy cells used Syrian-trained members sent to Europe, along with local recruits radicalized online, to organize "*complex, commanded and controlled*" operations remotely (abcnews.go.com). At the same time, in the Middle East, after 2017, ISIS infiltrated underground: it formed "*sleepers cells*" that switched to classic insurgency tactics – guerrilla attacks, bombings, assassinations of local leaders – with the aim of destabilizing the new authorities and maintaining chaos. For example, in Iraq and Syria, these hidden cells continue to attack military convoys, sabotage infrastructure (power lines, pipelines) and intimidate the population with night attacks, even years after the official loss of the Caliphate (crisisgroup.org). ISIS has also *branched out into other countries* through (provincial) franchises such as ISIS-K in Afghanistan, which acts subversively against local governments. ISIS's ability to plot in the shadows also emerges from the fact that it has inspired terrorist cells as far away as Southeast Asia (the attacks in Sri Lanka, 2019, were claimed by ISIS as part of the "global war"). Essentially, even without a visible "state," ISIS remained a global terrorist network, with *transnational conspiracies*, covert funding, and the ability to strike unexpectedly in various corners of the world. This clandestine persistence underscores the character of **an ongoing threat**: ISIS has demonstrated that it can move from a quasi-state to a subversive terrorist mafia, destabilizing entire societies through terror and sabotage.

**ISIS Final Score: 166 points (out of 166)** – which places the organization at the level ● of **Imminent Risk / Existential Danger** to

National Security. This maximum cumulative score confirms that, during the peak period of 2014–2019, ISIS met practically all the indicators of a violent extremist cult and a terrorist entity with a major destabilizing capacity. **The overall level of risk** is therefore extremely high: ISIS has posed a direct threat to the constitutional order, the territorial integrity of states and the safety of citizens, both in the Middle East and internationally – a fact demonstrated by its attacks and by the group's own statements. The international community has treated ISIS as such, launching a global military campaign against it. In conclusion, by applying the TRACE framework, ISIS ticks all cultic and terrorist risk factors to the highest degree, justifying its classification as an **existential threat** to national and global security in the analyzed interval.

*Methodological note:* The analysis applied to the ISIS case study was generated with the assistance of an artificial intelligence (AI) system, using exclusively open-source intelligence (OSINT). The scoring and interpretation were produced automatically based on the TRACE framework, without access to classified or sensitive data. As such, the content does not reflect any official institutional position and is intended solely as an exploratory and illustrative example of the model's functionality.

Artificial intelligence is integrated into TRACE as a pre-processing and consistency-testing instrument designed to systematize large volumes of open-source information and generate preliminary indicator values. AI-assisted scoring enables rapid identification of relevant patterns, supports internal coherence testing of the framework, and facilitates exploratory cross-case comparison. Final evaluation, interpretative judgment, and ethical responsibility remain inherently human functions.

In order not to exceed even more the space limits allocated to this article, we will only mention the interpretation and the final score attributed to **Hizb ut-Tahrir and the LaRouche and NXIVM movements, respectively**, thus showing that the application of the TRACE model can be done even by using AI, strictly from OSINT, resulting in quite precise risk assessments that can then be refined by the intelligence analyst:

**"◆ Hizb ut-Tahrir (HuT) – *Latent ideological threat***

Although declaratively non-violent, HuT promotes a radical theocratic ideology, openly advocates the abolition of secular states and the establishment of a global caliphate, rejects democracy, and promotes a binary worldview. Its hierarchical structure, infiltration capacity, and potential for indirect radicalization position it as a **mid-to-high-level latent threat**.

**Total TRACE score: 157/166**

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**◆ The LaRouche Movement – *A Marginal Ideological Cult with Low Disruptive Potential***

Although it has multiple cultic traits (worship of the leader, dogmatism, ideological manipulation), the LaRouche Movement does not have a paramilitary structure, does not promote violence, and does not develop parallel governance structures. Its risk lies in the potential for disinformation, polarisation and ideological undermining, especially in times of crisis.

**Total TRACE score: 101/166**

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**◆ NXIVM – *Coercive cult with high social and individual risk, but limited security impact***

NXIVM operated as a coercive organization with strong cult traits, using manipulation, psychological abuse, and strict control of members. Although it caused serious personal and social damage, it did not present a paramilitary character or an agenda of a systemic political or subversive nature, falling within a **high internal risk, but with little relevance for national security**.

**Total TRACE score: 113/166"**

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## **Conclusion**

This article has presented the TRACE model (Threat and Risk Assessment of Cultic Entities) as a proposed, to-be-tested, systematic analytical tool intended to evaluate organizations with cult-like characteristics potentially posing threats to national security. Drawing from seminal aspects of cult theory, organizational studies, and risk indicators common in the intelligence community, TRACE allows analysts to examine ideologically motivated and unorthodox actors in a systematic manner. Through ISIS, Hizb ut-Tahrir, NXIVM, and the

LaRouche Movement case studies, the model has shown to distinguish violent extremist organizations, latent ideological threats, and socially injurious but apolitical cults.

The deployment of TRACE, even where drawing solely from OSINT and tool-enabled artificial intelligence, provides comprehensive and actionable judgments which may then be further developed by human experts. This mirrors not only its functional value but its responsiveness to existing and prospective analytical environments. In scoring entities along the three key levels, cultic behaviors, organizational habits, and national security signals, TRACE fills an intelligence methodology gap, one which is particular to environments where conventional threat frameworks struggle to reflect the subtlety of hybrid or surreptitiously subversive actors.

TRACE aggregates partial scores across its three analytical layers in order to obtain a synthetic measure of cumulative cultic intensity, organizational coercion, and security relevance. Proposed risk thresholds serve as reference points derived from comparative case-study distributions, rather than fixed universal cut-offs. This allows flexible calibration as additional empirical testing is conducted.

The primary aim of TRACE is to provide a coherent analytical framework for structuring information, guiding systematic observation, and supporting reasoned judgment in the assessment of organizations exhibiting cult-like and potentially destabilizing characteristics. Full scientific validation and transformation into a mature operational instrument are envisaged as subsequent research stages, to be pursued through cross-evaluations between expert human analysts and AI-assisted scoring systems.

#### Limitations and Future Directions for Development

As with any analytical tool, TRACE has its limitations. One possible weakness is its susceptibility to reliance on the subjective judgment of the analyst, particularly at the scoring phase, where some traits might seem indeterminate or fall along a continuum. In its current implementation, the model is largely reliant on open-source intelligence (OSINT), which is potentially incomplete, biased, and vulnerable to disinformation. As such limitations are largely minimal and can readily be addressed in practice, TRACE does not supplant human expertise but augments it, presenting a logical and consistent model that is refined or modified by the analyst in light of the context of operations and classified information.

Future directions include offering a firm basis for the construction of specialist or sector-specific adaptations (e.g., to digital ideological subcultures, radicalized religious networks, or extensive conspiratorial milieux). It might also be incorporated into an AI-enabled digital platform with the capability to conduct initial automated scoring and alerting to repeated risk patterns. Scaling up the model through longitudinal research and cross-cultural uses will further reinforce its global validity and its analytical resilience to evolving hybrid threats.

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Aceasta este al patrulea volum de proceedings al Conferinței Științifice Intelligence și Cultura de Securitate (ICS), care cuprinde lucrările prezentate în cadrul ediției din 2025 - ICS 2025, publicat de Academia Națională de Informații „Mihai Viteazul” (ANIMV). ICS continuă să ofere studenților o platformă pentru dialog academic și pentru a împărtăși realizările lor științifice.

Ediția actuală își extinde participarea la un spectru mai larg de contributori, incluzând atât doctoranzi, cât și studenți din programele de master, cu un interes crescut pentru domenii precum intelligence, securitate națională, istorie și relații internaționale.

Organizarea conferinței a fost posibilă datorită eforturilor continue ale doctoranzilor și ale conducătorilor de doctorat din cadrul Școlii Doctorale Intelligence și Securitate a ANIMV.

Anticipăm cu entuziasm noi discuții și schimburi de idei în viitoarea ediție a conferinței.



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