

The Religious and Political History of ISIS and its Goals

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Nowadays, due to current events and the 24-hour news cycle, everyone seems to have some kind of knowledge of the Islamic religion. Many seek to expand and deepen this knowledge; by questioning and researching Islamic dogmas regarding the duties of believers, how easy and quick it is to convert, the diversity of Islam's schools of thought, and the diversity of its traditions and "sects".

The word "Islam" has many different connotations and meanings in Arabic. Some insist on the values of "submission" and "docility" that are associated with the verb form "aslama", while others prioritize the idea of peace and greeting that are associated with the root word "salama". Others also, in order to have a better understanding of this religion, choose to focus on the life, actions, words, and example of the Prophet of Islam, Muhammad, as relayed to us by historiographers.

The emergence of the "Islamic State" (also known as "Daech"¹) in the last few months conveys a particular liveliness when it comes to this questioning: Where did this movement originate from? Which Islam is it claiming to be representing? What are its real intentions? How does it justify these gruesome murders we're seeing it commit in cold blood? Does it have the authorization of an Islamic school of thought that would encourage similar acts? Where does it find, or think it finds, its religious legitimacy?

Several readings can be considered in order to try and pinpoint Daech's origins and understand its objectives. But first of all, we need to try evaluating the movement's appearance and its modus operandi. First we can say that it's a "recluse" state, similar to a hermit; only a handful of people were on the ground in the areas claimed by ISIS, and managed to come back with collected information regarding the movement's political methods and its exercise of power; their leader, Al-Baghdadi, who self-proclaimed himself Caliph of all Muslims, only spoke one time in front of cameras, but the members of this Islamic State uploaded several videos and

¹The word is an Arabic acronym: "*al-dawla al-islamiyya fi al-'Iraq wa bilâd al-Shâm.*" Which translates as "Islamic State of Iraq and Syria."

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posted them on the internet, and seem to be working ardently to let their master plan be known to everyone.

From what we have seen, we can affirm that Daech does not seek peace. The movement is aiming towards genocidal objectives, as its religious thought is an immobile, inorganic one, excluding any form of update or of interpretation. It considers itself as a prophetic movement heralding the imminent end of days.

Islam, according to Daech, is a precious companion to “Judgment Day”. Daech’s meteoric rise to power distinguishes it from other similar Islamist movements. The organization does not resemble Egypt’s Muslim Brotherhood, who was also seeking absolutist rule over millions of people, nor does it resemble Al-Qaeda, led for a long time by Bin Laden, as Daech eclipses it by far when it comes to sheer cold-blooded violence.

Bin Laden considered jihad as the prologue to a future caliphate. But he never expected to live to see it come true. The movement he founded seems to be more flexible nowadays, more worried about adapting to a variety of realities and circumstances, unlike Daech. Al-Qaeda was made up of autonomous movements, dispersed all over the world, and communicating through various networks. On the other hand, Daech needs a well-defined territory to remain legitimate, and requires a hierarchical command structure going down to the lowest degree on the scale. Daech has a bureaucracy made up of civilian and military components and its territory is divided into provinces. The demands of Daech and those of Al-Qaeda do not coincide. One needs to go back to 7th- century religious references to better understand the apocalyptic visions of this movement.

Daech’s doctrinal authorities usually refer to outdated traditions and texts of primitive Islam. In September 2014, through a strange diatribe mixing theological and juridical references, the leader of the Islamic State’s spokesman, Cheikh Adnani, called on occidental Muslims to choose an infidel and “bash his head with a rock”, “run him over with a car”, “poison him”, or even “destroy all his crops”. Biblical punishments? Terrorizing through imagery? Adnani also referred to US Secretary of State, John Kerry, as an “uncircumcised man²”.

² Graeme Wood, *What ISIS really wants?*, in The Atlantic, March 2015.

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Every pronounced speech, every important decision taken, every promulgated law, every minted coin, give way to a litany of published maxims attributed to the life of the Prophet Muhammad and his prophetic mission. The Islamic State's propaganda machine abounds with slogans, watchwords, maxims claiming its allegiance to Islam and its loyalty to its sources. By preaching a coherent, albeit decontextualized narration of Islam derived from classical Muslim authorities, Daech has drawn into its ranks the adventurers, the frustrated, the disenfranchised and people who are disillusioned with political life in the Middle East and Europe. If democratic powers wish to stop the menace of religious fanaticism, they must deepen their knowledge of the genealogy of the Islamic State. Where does this devoted and violent piety come from?

Ben Ladin's successor is Ayman al-Zawahiri. One of his companions, a 55-year-old Jordanian cleric called Abu Muhammad al-Maqdisi, considers himself the intellectual architect of Al-Qaeda. Maqdisi and Daech agree on most questions related to Muslim doctrine. They are closely associated under Salafist jihad, *al-salaf al -sâleh*: "The righteous predecessors". These predecessors are the Prophet and his companions, who should be honored and emulated in all matters; behavior, war, family life, etc. Maqdisi's disciple was Zarqawi who went to war in Iraq, and who quickly surpassed his teacher when it came to fanaticism, his penchant for bloody spectacles, and, from a doctrinal point of view, his hatred of other Muslims and the ease with which he excommunicated and killed them.

The practice of *takfir* or excommunication is a perilous practice in Islam. If a man says to his brother: "You are an infidel", the Prophet said, "One of them is just". Which means: one of the two brothers is lying and the other one is right, which one is right?

"If the accuser is lying, he himself has committed apostasy through false accusation". The punishment for apostasy is death. However, Zarqawi didn't budge and expanded the array of behaviors that could lead to the excommunication of Muslims. Denying the holiness of the Koran or the prophecies of Muhammad is "simple apostasy".

Zarqawi added a multitude of other reasons for excommunication. Some were sartorial or appearance-related (growing of the beard), some were ethical (consumption of drugs or alcohol); others were doctrinal: Shiism is considered an "innovation"; hence it is a negation of the initial perfection of the Koran. The Islamic State asserts that Shiite practices, such as worship at the

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tombs and shrines of imams and self-flagellation in public have no basis in the Koran or in the Prophet's example. This means that around 200 million Shiites are marked for death. Also marked for death are the heads of state of all Muslim countries, who put man-made laws above Allah's sharia law.

With this *takfir* doctrine, the Islamic State decides to purge the world by killing a large number of persons. The lack of information regarding the situation in the territory this movement claims makes it impossible to measure the amplitude of these massacres. This painful reality is manifested in videos posted online depicting the massacre of unwieldy Muslims, Coptic Christians, etc.

When it comes to Daech, we sometimes have the feeling that its supporters find themselves outside history, reactualizing in fiction an unsurpassable present of bloody and medieval traditions. They are meticulously dedicated and assiduous when it comes to implementing destruction, kidnapping, and assassinations. Daech has been associated with Saudi Arabian Wahhabism, but Wahhabis conquered lands that were already populated by Muslims. Wahhabism is a political and religious movement issued by Muhammad Ibn Abdelwahhab. Coming from the Hanbalit School, Wahhabism is known as a traditional judiciary school lauding divine origin of Islam's law. Wahhabism is properly fundamentalist, strict, following the "taqlid" (imitation) and "Ijtihad" (effort). Their implementation of sharia law seems paradoxically moderate when compared to the outbursts of violence perpetrated by the Islamic State. Daech seeks to conquer territories which it denies are today non-Muslim. Its imperious imparting of excommunication and its general "takfirism" recreates the same conditions that were present during the lifetime of the Prophet at the dawn of Islam: The movement needs to convert infidels or put them to the sword.

When Muhammad was alive, Muslims were in charge of instituting laws to reinforce their conquests. Of these institutions, Islamic State's fighters only abide by the ones that modern Muslims consider to be outdated, abolished, or useless; such as crucifixion, slavery, defenestration, beheading, etc. However, during the lifetime of Muhammad, tribal society's main goal was survival and not the pursuit of paradise as people didn't believe in paradise at that point. These early Muslims lived in a society where the main concern was rallying people to their own case and state.

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“We will conquer your Rome, break your crosses, and enslave your women,” was Adnani’s threat, while adding: “and even if we won’t be able to achieve this, our children and grandchildren will!”

Last October, to justify the kidnappings of Yazidi women and their children, Adnani explained in a text entitled “The Revival of Slavery before the Hour” which was published in the Islamic State’s journal: “According to sharia law, these prisoners should be distributed among Islamic State’s fighters who participated in the battles at “Sinjar” [Northern Iraq]... Sharia law formally authorizes the enslavement of kuffars’ [infidels] families and the transformation of their women into concubines for Muslim fighters. Those who deny it, refuse Koranic verses and the traditions of the Prophet. They apostatize Islam³”.

The Caliph and his territory

Tens of thousands of foreign Muslims have been migrating into Islamic State territory for months now, especially after the June 29, 2014 speech where Al-Baghdadi proclaimed himself caliph of the Islamic State. He gave himself genealogical lineage to legitimize his accession to the caliphate: He is a Sunni, and, like the Prophet, is a descendant of the Quraysh tribe, hence Muslims must pledge allegiance to him, the *bay’aa*. In this speech, given from a minbar at the Grand Mosque of Mosul, Al-Baghdadi explains that the re-establishment of the caliphate is an urgent task and every Muslim’s incumbent duty. He denigrated the caliphs of the Ottoman Empire and Ben Laden, alleging that unlike himself, none of the aforementioned are Qurayshis. A caliphate is a political entity that needs an authority, (*‘amr*) through an adult descent, Sunni, Quraychi, morally, physically, and mentally upstanding. Social justice will thus be implemented, housing and free healthcare for everyone, according to sharia law, the law of Allah.

The Islamic State chose to name its major English-language publication after the Syrian city of Dabiq near Aleppo. This city, through its mythology, occupies a particular place and its conquest has been extravagantly celebrated by the Islamic State. Islamic State supporters are convinced that at this location, according to a prediction by the Prophet of Islam, the Roman armies will

³ Interview of Bernard Haykal by Graeme Wood, *What ISIS really wants?*, in The Atlantic, March 2015.

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show up and wait to be vanquished by the Muslim armies. Intercepted telephone messages between Daech supporters show the interest level these individuals have for this city. “It is here that the first brazier was lit on fire, and it won’t be extinguished until all the Crusaders are burned...”, “You can imagine the major battles that will take place there, etc.” A propaganda video that is comparable to Hollywood peplums shows Daech armies waiting for the enemy with arms at the ready.

According to its spokesman, Adnani, while addressing its supporters in April 2013, the ambition of the Islamic State is to redraw the world in order to make it conform to the rules of the caliphate, the way the Prophet promulgated them. In August of the same year he added: “Our objective is to establish an Islamic State that does not recognize borders.” Since then, Daech conquered Raqqa, a Syrian provincial capital of around 500,000 inhabitants, and became the destination of a multitude of foreign combatants. These foreigners, with their wives and children, took simple itineraries towards the Islamic State. They follow the doctrine taught in the caliphate to be able to live according to sharia law and, if possible, die as martyrs. The humanitarian cost of the existence of the Islamic State is very high. It is true that its supporters invaded and annexed a poor population that is being terrorized by sharia law.

Al-Baghdadi is a Salafist jihadist. However, most Salafist movements forbid the use of violence and object to the actions of the Islamic State. Salafists are determined on expanding the Dar-al-Islam and set as long-term objective the implementation of sharia law, but they plan on reaching their goal through a personal purification effort and an assiduous religious practice. Indeed, Salafists follow their ancestors, known as Muhammad’s first companions.