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## "Apocalypse Soon" Revolutionary Revanchism of ISIS

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### *“Apocalypse Soon”*

#### Revolutionary Revanchism of ISIS

Nukhet Sandal

As I was writing this chapter in late 2017, the Iraqi forces had just retaken the last ISIS-held town. ISIS might be facing its end, but it is too early to claim that we will not witness its branches or its new manifestations in the near future. It is certain that new jihadi organizations will continue to emerge, and existing ones will change shape in response to the changing global political landscape. This is therefore a critical moment to look back at ISIS and discuss various elements of the organization’s ideology to prepare for what might be next.

There are many debates surrounding the ideology of ISIS. Through reports, articles, and books, scholars and practitioners have tried to capture exactly what the group stood for. It is not possible to make predictions about future jihadi organizations or to fight against this particular type of radicalism and savagery without understanding the ideology ISIS espoused. However, it is also important to recognize that the group’s multiple characteristics cannot be reduced to just one word. ISIS was not like al Qaeda or any other jihadi organization we have seen before. So how can we have a meaningful conversation about the ideology of ISIS

if it was not something we had seen before, and if there were many factors that led to its birth and evolution?

Analyzing ISIS's governance and ideology using the public theology framework, this chapter investigates the religious, political, and territorial factors involved in the organization's operations. This framework is useful, especially for analysts who are not scholars of Islamic studies, to navigate through the complex map of doctrines and aspirations of ISIS. Public theology is a perspective on an issue, such as governance, that is produced or publicly advocated by a religious institution or authority, that is expressed by a group of people who distinguish their practice and perspective from other traditions, and that informs the public discussions of these issues in multiple ways, including political opposition, violent or nonviolent protest, and publications.<sup>1</sup> The public theology of a particular issue includes human interpretation of what is relevant and to what extent particular religious premises are evident in the public arena. In the context of ISIS, it is not a judgment of what is "really" Islamic or jihadi, but how the group has redefined these notions in its every day practice. International relations scholar Fawaz Gerges, for example, calls Salafi jihadism "a traveling ideology," and as such it is "nourished on the ideas that can be tailored to fit the predilections and whims of every wave, providing nourishment, sustenance and motivations to new adherents."<sup>2</sup> Public theology is an organizing framework for understanding the "ISIS version" of this "traveling ideology" and its implications for governance.

The chapter also assumes an epistemic lens and emphasizes how ISIS reformulated the existing understandings of Islamic governance and jihadism. This is not an entirely new position; in their edited book, Christina Hellmich and Andreas Behnke frame the discussion of al Qaeda's origins and strategy under "the epistemology of terrorism."<sup>3</sup> An epistemic lens encourages the analyst to question what remains constant, what has changed, and what networks made a difference in the understanding of this new form of jihadism. With their reframing of the conventional Salafi jihadi ideology, ISIS leaders and preachers devised new interpretation of jihadism and Islamic governance.<sup>4</sup> They shaped the conventional ideologies of jihadi governance within the political parameters delineated

by the territory they control and the time frame they operate in. Their attempts to reformulate jihadi doctrines of governance and warfare can be seen in the numerous speeches, publications, treatises, and even syllabi written specifically for the jihadis.<sup>5</sup>

Elsewhere, I have formulated the dimensions of the public theology framework as substantive, spiritual, and spatial. In line with these components of public theology, the chapter is divided into three sections. The first section covers essential questions regarding the identity of ISIS. Was it a state, as it called itself? Was it just another terrorist group? The second section focuses on the theological aspects of the organization’s ideology. What did the organization mean when it declared it was Islamic? How do contemporary scholars view its religious identity? The third section focuses on the territorial aspects of the group’s governance and warfare. What difference does it make that the organization was primarily located in the Levant, and not in South Asia or sub-Saharan Africa? What kind of territorial factors and legacies shaped the group’s public theology of governance? While reviewing these dimensions, the chapter maintains a forward-looking stance and examines what each factor means for jihadi movements in general.

### **Substantive Dimension: ISIS, Statehood, and the Caliphate**

Was ISIS really a state, as it claimed to be? Or was it a group of thugs and wannabes, as President Obama once casually implied?<sup>6</sup> The question does not have a simple answer, but many analysts agree that ISIS was more than a terrorist organization. Audrey Kurth Cronin, professor of international security, argues that ISIS was not a terrorist organization but a “pseudo-state led by a conventional army.”<sup>7</sup> In a provocative article, political scientist Stephen Walt agrees with Cronin’s diagnosis and reminds readers that state-building has been a brutal enterprise for centuries (he gives multiple examples that include the Bolsheviks, the Maoists, and the creation of the United States among others), and “movements that were once beyond the pale sometimes end up accepted and legitimized, if they manage to hang onto power long enough.”<sup>8</sup> From these perspectives, ISIS

was not an anomaly; it operated like just another emerging state, regardless of its ideology.

What ISIS was engaged in at the height of its power, however, was not traditional state-building. The group followed what it called “prophetic methodology,” which was based on an attempt to closely follow prophet Muhammad’s and early Muslims’ example in governance and warfare. In this spirit, ISIS revived the institution of the caliphate (khilafah) when, in a June 2014 audio recording, it declared its leader, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, to be caliph. A caliph is the supreme religious and civil ruler in the Islamic tradition. The last caliph was the heir to the Ottoman throne, Abdülmecid II. In March 1924, Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, the founder of the Republic of Turkey, and the new political elite abolished the caliphate post in Turkey in an attempt to make the country secular. The Muslim world has not had a caliph since then. Even when the post was in existence a caliph did not fully function as the leader of the Muslim world; the post lost its influence and became merely symbolic within a couple of centuries of Islam’s birth. ISIS took pride in giving life to a long-defunct political and religious institution, and its leaders emphasized that a caliphate does not have any ethnic, racial, or regional allegiance and occasionally exploits the nationalist, ethnic, and racial tensions in the West.<sup>9</sup>

The declaration of a caliphate was not a straightforward process even within jihadi circles. ISIS had its roots in al Qaeda in Iraq, and the group’s evolution as an independent organization had already disturbed al Qaeda’s leadership. Declaring the caliphate further strained existing relations. Al Qaeda’s and the Taliban’s spiritual leader was Mullah Mohammad Omar until 2015. The designation of Baghdadi as caliph in 2014 challenged both the spiritual leadership of Mullah Omar and undermined al Qaeda’s political authority. The fact that Mullah Omar was away from the public eye for a long time contributed to the challenges associated with the leadership competition. Mullah Omar was so removed from the day-to-day politics of al Qaeda that in 2015, when the Afghan government announced that Mullah Omar had died in 2013, the news was not received with much surprise. ISIS founders and leaders always regarded al Qaeda as lackadaisical, and they wanted to create the ultimate Islamic

political unit with a leader who would have authority over the Muslim world. The desire for this utmost power led them to claim the caliphate, the only political entity that would give them the legitimacy they desired.

Seeing itself as the ultimate political unit for Muslims, ISIS behaved like a state and boasted about providing health care and public services in the territories it commanded. Its glossy publications featured photos of street-cleaning services, cancer treatment for children, and care homes for the elderly. The group issued its own currency system “in an effort to disentangle the Ummah from the corrupt interest-based global financial system.”<sup>10</sup> It called on Muslims to move to the caliphate and told them that it was a sin to live in any other setting (Dar al-Kufr) now that there was a purely Islamic entity (Dar al-Islam).

Since ISIS encouraged hijrah (religious migration to the land of Islam), it came as no surprise that it attracted many foreign fighters. Fighters from more than eighty countries joined the organization. Members had different incentives and reasons for joining ISIS. The religious knowledge of these fighters, for the most part, was rudimentary. According to the organization’s jihadi employment documents submitted by 4,030 foreign recruits, which were acquired by the Syrian opposition site Zaman al-Wasl and shared with the Associated Press, 70 percent of recruits defined themselves as having just “basic” knowledge of sharia (the lowest level the recruits could pick), around 24 percent were categorized as having an “intermediate” knowledge, and just 5 percent considered themselves advanced students of Islam.<sup>11</sup> In other words, most of the recruits joined ISIS for political reasons or for adventure, not because they had a solid grasp of and wanted to follow a coherent religious ideology. Governing these people within a pseudo-state structure proved to be challenging. ISIS leadership had concerns about how foreign fighters from different backgrounds and their families would adjust to the new lifestyle and their expectations. Being a terrorist organization operating from behind the scenes and trying to govern territories are two different projects. Although ISIS had significant resources, it still needed to meet the expectations of the newcomers, some of whom were coming from established states with decent services and infrastructure. Reflecting these tensions, the group made a point to warn that “the Khilafah is a state whose inhabitants and

soldiers are human beings. They are not infallible angels. You may see things that need improvement and that are being improved.”<sup>12</sup>

ISIS operated as an expansionist political unit. Most states and organizations agree to operate within the political system, and they usually care about outside legitimacy.<sup>13</sup> ISIS did not have such international legitimacy concerns or allies in the conventional sense because it rejected the concept of the modern state, international treaties, and borders. It demanded *bay'a* (allegiance) from other political and Islamic groups in the region and worldwide. The allegiances it secured were prominently featured in its media outlets, including its magazine, *Dabiq*. Not all of these allegiances were religion based. Michael Weiss and Hassan Hassan note that many tribes joined the organization not because they endorsed its ideology; the tribal allegiances were driven predominantly by power politics.<sup>14</sup> Therefore it is crucial not to overestimate the power of ideology, especially in settings where there is a political vacuum that threatens the existence of groups and organizations.

As part of its territorial expansion strategy, ISIS portrayed its aims as unequivocally religious. To illustrate, it tried to justify its battles against Kurdish paramilitary groups of the region like Yekîneyên Parastina Gel and Partiya Karkerên Kurdistanê. “Our war with Kurds is a religious war. It is not a nationalistic war—we seek the refuge of Allah,” proclaimed ISIS; “we do not fight Kurds because they are Kurds. Rather we fight the disbelievers amongst them, the allies of the Crusaders and Jews in their war against the Muslims.”<sup>15</sup> ISIS regularly called the Kurdish groups it was fighting against “commies,” “terrorists,” and “Assad regime supporters” with “numerous flimsy female ‘fighters.’”<sup>16</sup>

Despite its aspirations to statehood and a territorial base, ISIS tried to increase its reach through attacks in multiple settings globally. These attacks did not need to be coordinated with the organization; mere inspiration and the attacker’s testimony were good enough for ISIS. In the 2016 nightclub shooting in Orlando, Florida, the perpetrator, Omar Mateen, stated that he was a “soldier” of the organization, and he expressed his admiration for Tamerlan Tsarnaev and the Boston Marathon bombings, noting that it was now his “turn.”<sup>17</sup> The definition and character of lone-wolf attacks have changed considerably in the past decade. Especially

after the Boston Marathon bombing perpetrated by the Tsarnaev brothers, who were inspired by al Qaeda, “terrorism by inspiration” and lone-wolf attacks have been prominently featured and endorsed in jihadi publications. ISIS spokesperson Abu Muhammad al-Adnani was quoted as saying, “If you can kill a disbelieving American or European . . . kill him in any manner or way however it may be. Do not ask for anyone’s advice and do not seek anyone’s verdict.”<sup>18</sup> This pragmatic flexibility enabled ISIS to take advantage of any violent act committed by self-proclaimed sympathizers and supporters. In short, because it was convenient, terrorism by inspiration became part of the unconventional apocalyptic state’s “foreign policy tool kit,” and one can expect this mode of terrorism to be part of future terrorist organizations, regardless of their ideology.

### **Spiritual Dimension: “The Religious” in the “Islamic”**

The debate over what is “real” Islam is beyond the scope of this chapter. Any reasonable analyst will grant that ISIS is not representative of Muslims or Islam. However, it would be naive to dismiss an organization that called itself Islamic and used frequent references to Islamic texts and traditions simply as “un-Islamic.” Graeme Wood, the journalist who wrote the controversial “What ISIS Really Wants,” stated that ISIS was indeed Islamic, and that “the religion preached by its most ardent followers derives from coherent and even learned interpretations of Islam.”<sup>19</sup> Some disagree with Wood’s argument; some scholars, for example, have argued that ISIS’s interpretation was not coherent and not consistent with the rich Islamic legal tradition.<sup>20</sup> This ongoing conversation is intellectually stimulating, but it does not change the fact that there will be many violent organizations and groups in the future that claim religious identities in order to rally followers. Even if scholars showed that ISIS violated many Islamic precepts, it is doubtful that this argument would have a significant impact on the group’s recruitment.

ISIS described itself as jihadi Salafi. Salafism is a branch of Sunni Islam that is based on emulating the actions of the Salafs (“righteous predecessors”) and living as one would have in the early days of Islam. Combined



with jihadism, the ideology's focus becomes the military conquests, symbols, and strategies of the early Islamic era. The organization's interpretation and enactment of this ideology, however, was much stricter and more focused than that of any other organization that described itself as jihadi. Political analyst Shiraz Maher, in his detailed survey of jihadi Salafism, states that ISIS constituted the "most dramatic physical manifestation of Salafi-Jihadi doctrine in the modern era, serving a dualistic purpose between temporal and cosmic ends."<sup>21</sup> ISIS indeed espoused a distinct apocalyptic ideology. The apocalyptic revanchism of the organization that promised divine justice had an influence on disillusioned Muslim youth both in the Middle East and in other regions.

In Islamic eschatology, the scenario of apocalypse usually includes the symbolism of the imam and savior Mahdi, who is expected to establish his rule in the world and who, with the second coming of Jesus, will fight against the antichrist. A scholar of militant Islamism, William McCants, drew attention to the fact that, unlike in prior Islamic apocalyptic movements, the Mahdi did not feature prominently in the contemporary ISIS doctrine; the caliphate is the "locus of the group's apocalyptic imagination."<sup>22</sup> In other words, despite the strong emphasis on the "end of the world" discourse, the apocalyptic narrative of the group focused more on the near future than on the present. Political historian Jean-Pierre Filiu situated the resurgence of this type of Sunni apocalyptic thinking within a contemporary framework that is delineated by occurrences like the 1979 Islamic Revolution, the U.S. invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq, and increasing Shiite fanaticism about the apocalypse in Iran and Iraq.<sup>23</sup> ISIS's ideology, in this sense, was not just apocalyptic but also quintessentially revanchist. It showcased blood and suffering, and continuously promised violent revenge and domination of the West, going beyond the apocalyptic battle scenes. It fed on the frustrations of the local communities with foreign interventions and unfulfilled promises, and it exploited the disenfranchisement of youth worldwide.

ISIS espoused a takfiri ideology. A takfiri is a Muslim who declares another Muslim to be a nonbeliever (*kafir*). ISIS prioritized purifying the Islamic world and territories under its control more than organizing attacks abroad. According to the group's takfiri perspective, the Shia Mus-

lms were regarded as apostates because their practice and ideology were considered to be later additions to the original Quranic precepts. ISIS designated many other types of Muslims as *murtaddin* (one who turns away from religion). For example, any Muslim who participated in man-made political systems, through voting or public service, was considered an apostate.

No organization’s ideology can be imagined independent of its leader. In this vein, ISIS’s public theology of governance could partly be attributed to its de facto founder, Abu Musab al-Zarqawi. Zarqawi was the head of al Qaeda in Iraq until he was killed in 2006. A prominent Salafi cleric who influenced al Qaeda’s intellectual framework, Abu Muhammad al-Maqdisi, was Zarqawi’s mentor, although Zarqawi’s zeal went beyond even Maqdisi’s. Despite his training under Maqdisi, Zarqawi represented an epistemic break from the rest of the al Qaeda leadership. His background was different from that of Osama bin Laden and Ayman al-Zawahiri, both of whom were from wealthy families and had strong educational backgrounds (Zawahiri studied medicine, and bin Laden had a degree in public administration, whereas Zarqawi was a high school dropout who later studied under Maqdisi’s tutelage). After spending some time in Afghanistan, Zarqawi established Jama‘at al-Tawhid wal-Jihad (the Group of God’s Unity and Jihad) in 2002 and pledged lukewarm allegiance to Osama bin Laden in 2004, which resulted in the organization becoming al Qaeda in Iraq. Zarqawi’s strong condemnation of Shiism and his uncompromising takfiri attitude made both Zawahiri and Maqdisi uncomfortable.

When he moved to Iraq, Zarqawi found the jihadis in the region too complacent. In his 2004 letter to the al Qaeda leadership, Zarqawi complained that the jihadis in Iraq were behaving too cautiously and were proud not to have lost lives in their struggle. “That should change,” Zarqawi wrote, as “we have told them in our many sessions with them that safety and victory are incompatible.”<sup>24</sup> Al Qaeda did not like Zarqawi’s fanaticism and the strict implementation of the takfiri ideology. In line with Zarqawi’s vision, the number of Muslims killed by ISIS was higher than the number of other victims, which shows that ISIS prioritized “purifying” the “Land of Islam” over organizing attacks abroad. This priority

conflicted with al Qaeda's desire to target non-Muslims (with a focus on the United States and its allies) and its concerns about maintaining unity in the Muslim world. Although al Qaeda was more reserved in its public statements regarding ISIS, the latter was vocal about its distaste especially for Zawahiri and the Taliban and their "soft" approach toward the Shia. In an article the group stated that Zawahiri's policies toward the Shia "were clearly based upon his deviant belief that they are 'Muslims.'"<sup>25</sup> In the same article, to Zawahiri's statement that no Islamic state had systematically killed the Shia, ISIS responded that since the Shia had had political aspirations since the Safavid Empire it was now acceptable to kill them.

Following up on the differences of perspective between ISIS and al Qaeda, Jessica Stern and J. M. Berger posited that "where al-Qaida framed its pitch to potential recruits in relatable terms as 'doing the right thing', ISIS seeks to stimulate more than to convince."<sup>26</sup> Al Qaeda, for example, did not use slaves because of its concerns about public opinion and legitimacy. It emphasized "hearts and minds" in the Muslim world, and one can even argue that it wanted to become mainstream. Adam Gadahn, former spokesman and media adviser for al Qaeda, once wrote in a letter that jihadi forums are not ideal for al Qaeda interviews because they are "biased towards (Salafists) and not any Salafist, but the Jihadi Salafist, which is just one trend of the Muslims trends. The Jihad Salafist is a small trend within a small trend."<sup>27</sup> Al Qaeda, for the most part, has had clear political goals even if they are far-fetched. ISIS, on the other hand, was millenarian. In its worldview there was no possibility of a compromise or negotiation with other political actors, and the group did not care about public opinion in the Muslim world.

The religious claims of ISIS did not go unopposed. Muslims worldwide condemned the group's actions, and many Muslim organizations declared ISIS "un-Islamic." For example, 126 scholars of Islam penned a famous letter to Baghdadi, explaining in detail why specific actions such as torture, disfiguring the dead, forcible conversions, and slavery are forbidden in Islam.<sup>28</sup> ISIS published articles against such statements and initiatives. In a *Dabiq* article entitled "Islam Is the Religion of Sword, not Pacifism," the group states:

There is a slogan repeated continuously by apologetic “du’at” when flirting with the West and that is their statement: “Islam is the religion of peace,” and they mean pacifism by the word peace. They have repeated this slogan so much to the extent that some of them alleged that Islam calls to permanent peace with kufr and the kafirin. How far is their claim from the truth, for Allah has revealed Islam to be the religion of the sword, and the evidence for this is so profuse that only a zindiq (heretic) would argue otherwise.<sup>29</sup>

In another issue of *Dabiq*, in an article called “Wala’ and Bara’ vs. American Racism,” they stated:

“Islamic” preachers and writers often do so with humanistic undertones that seek to portray Islam as a religion of peace that teaches Muslims to coexist with all. Deluded by the open-ended concept of “tolerance,” they cite numerous ayat and ahadith that—rightfully so—serve to demonstrate that racial hatred has no place in Islam, but they do so for the purpose of advancing an agenda that attempts to “Islamize” more “liberal” concepts that the kuffar apply across the board for achieving evil, such as political pluralism, freedom of religion, and acceptance of sodomites.<sup>30</sup>

The group also strongly condemned interreligious dialogue initiatives:

Francis is taking the route traveled by his counterparts from the apostate “scholars” at al-Azhar and in Medina, namely the path of overlooking the clear call to warring against shirk and its people throughout the Quran and Sunnah—and instead altering the religion to fit some devilish “inter-faith” fantasy, far removed from the truth, which one is naturally inclined to seek. This is all part of a plan to demilitarize Islam or, to put it more correctly, to remove the clearly Quran- and Sunnah-based duty of waging jihad against pagans until all the world is ruled by the Shari’ah.<sup>31</sup>

In short, ISIS followed major religious initiatives and arguments against its policies and governance, and took the time and energy to boldly respond. It argued that Islam was a religion of the sword and there could not be any compromise. Although the group claimed a religious identity and performed gruesome executions, there was nothing uniquely religious about the nature of its violence. Stathis Kalyvas, a political science professor, noted that “there is nothing particularly Islamic or jihadi about the organization’s violence” and the practices used by ISIS “have been used by a variety of insurgent incumbent actors in civil wars across time and space.”<sup>32</sup> He recommended analyzing ISIS as a “revolutionary” actor that happened to be Islamist, rather than as either simply an Islamist actor or a sectarian one.<sup>33</sup> This interpretation is consistent with Cronin’s and Walt’s analyses; the group might have been Islamist, but it exhibited the character of a revolutionary pseudo-state and analyses should take this political qualification into account.

### **Spatial Dimension: Territorial Underpinnings in Perspective**

An organization’s ideology is intimately tied to the time and space it operates in. ISIS was, for the most part, the result of the political vacuum created by the American invasion of Iraq and hasty withdrawal from the region after promising the Sunni groups full participation in the new Iraqi political system. Unfulfilled promises and the early withdrawal consolidated the existing frustrations with Arab authoritarian regimes and frequent foreign interventions. Not surprisingly, the group’s ideology was shaped by the political factors that gave birth to it. Fawaz Gerges confirms that, in his conversations with Iraqi tribal leaders, many acknowledged that their sons joined ISIS not because of its Islamist ideology but as a means of resistance to the sectarian central authority in Iraq and its regional patron Iran.<sup>34</sup> The unique conditions created by the invasion, such as the disbanding of the Iraqi Army and the establishment of special detention facilities, helped bring together disillusioned actors with a jihadi orientation and experience. Abu Ahmed, a senior official in ISIS, once stated that Camp Bucca (the detention center where he met Baghdadi for the first time) was an extraordinary opportunity for jihadis in that it

brought them all together in a physically safe environment; “Here [in Camp Bucca], we were not only safe, but we were only a few hundred metres away from the entire al-Qaida leadership.”<sup>35</sup>

From mid-2013 to mid-2014, ISIS extended its territories to Syria. The group’s expansion to Syria was possible because of failed governance and civil war. Weiss and Hassan remind readers that ISIS benefited from the absence of a “Syrian” jihadi discourse in war-ravaged Syria and that the group had a monopoly on the global Salafi jihadist narrative. In April 2013 Baghdadi unilaterally declared the group’s jurisdiction over Syria and named the organization “the Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham.” The expansion created further complications with al Qaeda. Baghdadi did not heed the stark warnings and insisted on the group’s independence. Cole Bunzel noted that this division divided the jihadi ideologues; one group dominated by younger jihadis supported Baghdadi, whereas another group of senior jihadis denounced ISIS’s defiance.<sup>36</sup>

ISIS also signaled how seriously it took the territory and region it operated in. It put great symbolic emphasis on the Syrian city of Dabiq, near Aleppo, after which the group named its magazine. In Islamic eschatology, Dabiq is one of the sites where the caliphate will meet the armies of “Rome” (there are different interpretations of what “Rome” stands for; the most common one is any army of “the West”). ISIS actually wanted to draw the United States and its ally armies to the region; it was part of its revolutionary revanchist theology. One of the group’s famous statements noted, “If one examined the battleground of Sham, he would see that the military factions before ISIS’s official expansion fell mostly into four categories: (1) Islamic factions with an international agenda; (2) ‘Islamic’ factions with a nationalist agenda (leaders have a Salafi background and soldiers engage in more religious practices than those in the third category); (3) nationalist factions with an ‘Islamic’ agenda; and (4) secularist factions with a democratic agenda (Free Syrian Army).”<sup>37</sup> In that political landscape ISIS prided itself on being the only authentic Islamic unit, fighting against all the others that are Islamic in name only.

ISIS’s public theology of governance and its ideology are unique to the time period it operated in, while the group was a product of the historical perspectives and understandings of jihadism. Today’s communication

technologies, for example, change the color of ideologies and redefine in-group discussion parameters by increasing the reach of any organization's message. McCants reminds us that the biggest split in the global jihadist community happened with the advent of new forms of social media such as Twitter, where, unlike on private discussion boards, discussants with unpalatable views cannot be silenced.<sup>38</sup> Radical groups can market their ideologies online and provide sympathizers with concrete instructions on how to carry out attacks.

ISIS had observable ideological underpinnings that cannot be captured comprehensively in a chapter-length treatment. Wahhabism, the ultra-conservative Islamic doctrine founded by Muhammad Ibn Abd al-Wahhab in the eighteenth century, was one such influence. The doctrine aimed to purge the religion of practices that did not exist in the Qu'ran or in the initial years of the birth of Islam, such as tomb visitation. Abd al-Wahhab made a pact with Muhammed bin Saud, a prominent tribal leader who was in control of a critical portion of the Arabian Peninsula. The pact has continued into the political structure of contemporary Saudi Arabia. Hassan traced many of the extremist religious concepts that constitute ISIS's ideology to Saudi Arabia's Sahwa (Islamic awakening) movement in the 1970s and a similar movement in Egypt, where Salafism and political Islam merged.<sup>39</sup>

There are also individuals whose legacies cannot be underestimated in the formation of ISIS's ideology and governance. Among them are Ibn Taymiyya, Sayyid Qutb, Abdullah al-Muhajir, Abu Bakr Naji, Sayyid Imam Sharif, and Abu Musab Al-Suri. Ibn Taymiyya, a medieval Sunni Muslim theologian, was the main intellectual influence behind Wahhabism; he espoused a literal interpretation of the Qu'ran, and his writings endorsed takfiri approaches; he believed that if a Muslim does not practice the "right" interpretation of Islam then he should be severely punished. Egyptian author and leading Muslim Brotherhood member Sayyid Qutb's revolutionary Islamism also played a role, albeit much less direct than Taymiyya and Wahhabism. In his famous *Ma'alim fi-l-Tariq* (Milestones), Qutb defended the use of physical force and jihad to bring down existing organizations and authorities. "Given Qutb's advocacy of systemic change," John Calvert maintained, "his influence has been strongest among Islamist militants who adopt the methods of 'direct action'

to bring about a theocratic state.”<sup>40</sup> Abdullah al-Muhajir’s treatises (such as the *Introduction to the Jurisprudence of Jihad*) are known to have influenced Zarqawi’s worldview. Muhajir argued that Muslims are obligated to leave lands of infidelity that submit to positive law, that “siding with apostates against Muslims is the greatest infidelity of all, and that Islam does not differentiate between military and civilians.”<sup>41</sup>

Al Qaeda strategist Abu Bakr Naji’s 2004 online manifesto, *The Management of Savagery*, also undergirded the ISIS strategy. Deriving insights from Ibn Taymiyya, Naji divided the path to statehood into three stages: exercising the power of vexation and exhaustion; the administration of savagery; and taking power and establishing the state.<sup>42</sup> Naji was skeptical of the former treatises on jihad; he cautioned in *The Management of Savagery* that “the political, security, and military books which the heretical movements published—such as the Brothers—are more dangerous than books of others because they mix their writings with proofs from the Book [the Qur’an] and the Sunna and events from the sira after they have distorted them.”<sup>43</sup> In addition to Abdullah al-Muhajir’s book and Abu Bakr Naji’s *The Management of Savagery*, Gerges counted *The Essentials of Making Ready* (for Jihad) by Sayyid Imam Sharif (also known as Abdel-Qader Ibn Abdel-Aziz or Dr. Fadl) among the three manifestos that “represent the most extreme thinking within the Salafi jihadist movement and the degeneration of this ideology into Fiqh Damaa (the jurisprudence of blood).”<sup>44</sup> Abu Musab Al Suri’s contributions to jihadi strategy (epitomized by his book-length manifesto *The Call to Global Islamic Resistance* and individual shorter writings, including his occasional articles called “Jihadi Experiences” in al Qaeda’s magazine, *Inspire*) most likely played a role in shaping the ideology and strategy a jihadi organization should follow. In his work, Suri emphasized the importance of joining both open fronts and individual operations, and he advised transforming the resistance into a strategic phenomenon, “after the pattern of the Palestinian intifada against the occupation forces, the settlers and their collaborators . . . but on a broader scale, originally comprising the entire Islamic world.”<sup>45</sup>

ISIS is unique to its time and should not be conflated with other Islamic groups and movements. Ahmed al-Hamdan, a well-known jihadi Salafist and a former student of Maqdisi, wrote in his famous “Methodological



Difference between ISIS and Al Qaida” that it would be a mistake to say that ISIS was a part of the Salafi jihadi movement for they have destroyed the Salafi Jihadi methodology and attacked its iconic leaders.<sup>46</sup> This iconoclasm might well be interpreted as a natural next step in the jihadi trajectory that exhausted its conventional methods and experienced a political transformation. In that sense it is critical to follow influential jihadi theologians worldwide to observe what kind of intellectual currents are in development.

### **Looking Ahead: The Legacy of ISIS and Future Jihadi Movements**

There are too many dimensions of ISIS’s existence and thinking to be reduced to ideology. ISIS challenged the traditional conception of a terrorist organization. It transformed parts of a once authoritarian country into a religious-cult-like political unit and started showcasing its brutality through multiple media channels. ISIS might be territorially defeated, yet its members are now escaping to different continents to take part in other organizations. It is obvious that there will be groups in the future who will carry the caliphate banner and take lessons from the ISIS experience. The same goes for attacks “by inspiration.” Lone-wolf attacks existed before ISIS. However, ISIS made the most efficient use of the jihad sympathizers, and it continuously and publicly encouraged these attacks. The number of attempts might have been relatively low, but when an attack happened, it usually resulted in a high number of casualties.

ISIS was considered jihadi Salafi, but not like the groups that came before it. It was a revolutionary revanchist organization that made frequent use of apocalyptic imagery and narratives. Its understanding of governance was shaped by its leaders and by the territories it operated in, and it borrowed perspectives from different sources in history. It was the outcome of a series of failed jihadi projects, evolving theoretical perspectives on governance, changing technologies, the Western legacy in the region, personal feuds, and most important, a political vacuum. Even when a group is physically defeated, its members and sympathizers live

on, and its ideology is not destroyed. Political vacuums and foreign interventions prepare the ground for radicals who have coherent enough ideologies to rally the frustrated masses that are facing existential threats.

The ideological battle against jihadi groups is also a sensitive one. Politicians should avoid weighing in on the religious debate and using theological terms. It is critical to keep in mind that overt political support for one group might discredit it in the eyes of potential followers. Atheel al-Nujaifi, who was the governor of Ninevah Governorate between 2009 and 2015, once said that “this issue [ISIS] has to be resolved not by Maliki, but as a Sunni project. We have to struggle against ISIS with our Sunni way. It is not a fight for Shiites or Maliki’s supporters. Maliki cannot fight ISIS.”<sup>47</sup> Outside intervention in the politics of ideology makes matters even worse and gives ammunition to radicals. Theological debate about how Islamic a group is or is not should be left to theologians and scholars of Islam.

As this chapter notes, many groups and tribes pledged allegiance to ISIS as a means of self-preservation. Looking ahead, this is one fact that policymakers should remember. Even when there is a significant religious identity present, political units, including tribes, operate to protect their existence and, if possible, extend their influence. The Realpolitik dimension sometimes got lost in the widely distributed dramatic imagery produced by ISIS and the sensational reporting of the organization’s executions and advances. Especially given the ISIS recruits’ low level of religious knowledge, it is clear that something beyond religion was at play in the organization’s operational success. The major policy lesson here is to pay more attention to state-building and cooperating with leaders around the world to prevent power imbalances and vacuums.

In order to prevent ISIS from reappearing in the future, the focus should primarily be on good governance and capacity-building in conflict-ridden societies. If communities feel disenfranchised and their basic needs are not met, they are more likely to join jihadi movements. That is why it is critical to partner with or provide support to local policymakers to build infrastructures and create systems where concerns can be aired through political platforms. In Iraq, for example, a solid power-sharing system between Sunni and Shia communities that will alleviate

their existential concerns is essential. Similarly, in Syria, the end of the civil war and a focus on reconstruction and reconciliation, albeit challenging, could prove to be the most effective solution against jihadi organization recruitment and radicalization. Relying only on military capabilities and operations, in the absence of reliable partnerships, will likely alienate local communities and make matters worse.

Another policy that would help the battle against radicalization would be to minimize ambitious foreign policy engagements and interventions abroad. ISIS and many other jihadi organizations used the Western military presence in the Middle East and South Asia to justify their actions. In the absence of broad international consensus, foreign interventions rarely produce desired results and are likely to weaken political structures that are not able to cope with radicalization.

On the domestic politics front, it is critical to have democratic systems with a strong civil society presence and multiple channels through which citizens and residents can convey their concerns. When fighting terrorist organizations, reducing the problem to identity politics and singling out religious or national groups might have short-term political benefits, but in the long term those actions will only help radical organizations recruit adherents. Even if it claims a religious identity, ISIS and other jihadi organizations constitute a direct threat to more Muslims than non-Muslims. Portraying the tension as one between the West and Islam is not only analytically fallacious and factually incorrect, but also practically dangerous. Therefore, while keeping necessary intelligence facilities in place, it is crucial to treat all citizens and residents equitably and take measures to decrease alienation and disenfranchisement in democratic societies.

### Notes

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