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# MIZAN

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VOLUME 1

2016

## THE ISLAMIC STATE IN HISTORICAL AND COMPARATIVE PERSPECTIVE

EDITED BY MICHAEL PREGILL



**Boston University** Pardee School of Global Studies  
Institute on Culture, Religion & World Affairs: CURA



# *Mizan: Journal for the Study of Muslim Societies and Civilizations*

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The Islamic State in Historical and Comparative Perspective

Edited by Michael Pregill

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Arabic text has been removed from one article for technical reasons.

The HTML versions of some articles were originally published with hyperlinked glosses and gallery images; these have been omitted, with the text of some glosses edited and inserted parenthetically where appropriate.

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## CONTENTS

Editor's Introduction: Context and Comparison in the Age of ISIS <i>Michael Pregill</i>	3
Redeeming Slavery: The 'Islamic State' and the Quest for Islamic Morality <i>Kecia Ali</i>	41
Response to Kecia Ali <i>Jessica Stern</i>	67
ISIS, Eschatology, and Exegesis: The Propaganda of <i>Dabiq</i> and the Sectarian Rhetoric of Militant Shi'ism <i>Michael Pregill</i>	75
Response to Michael Pregill <i>Kenneth Garden</i>	125
ISIS: The Taint of Murji'ism and the Curse of Hypocrisy <i>Jeffrey Bristol</i>	129
The Islamic State as an Empire of Nostalgia <i>Thomas Barfield</i>	167
Response to Thomas Barfield <i>Franck Salameh</i>	187
ISIL and the (Im)permissibility of Jihad and <i>Hijrah</i> : Western Muslims between Text and Context <i>Tazeen Ali and Evan Anhorn</i>	195
About the Authors	219



## Editor's Introduction: Context and Comparison in the Age of ISIS

*Michael Pregill*

*Public scholarship and addressing ISIS as media phenomenon*

The Mizan initiative aims to address the pressing need to make the expertise of scholars of Islam available to a wider public, particularly by distributing original scholarship of contemporary relevance through digital channels on an open access model (that is, free of all restrictions on access and almost all on reuse).<sup>1</sup> Undoubtedly, more conventional scholarly publishing outlets, whether university presses or private academic publishing houses, have achieved great success in utilizing digital media, networks, and distribution systems to disseminate the results of scholarly research more widely than was possible in the past. However, the Internet, particularly social media, has also to a great extent enabled the acute spike in Islamophobia and other forms of xenophobic expression in America and Europe over the last decade.<sup>2</sup> Mizan aims at restoring the balance—to contribute to an improvement of online discourse about various facets of Muslim culture, both historical and contemporary, by making a range of material freely available on this website, including the peer-reviewed, open access journal of which this essay is a part. We firmly believe that promoting sophisticated but accessible scholarship aimed at a variety of audiences, addressing a variety of subjects, provides an important service to diverse communities among both scholars and the general public with an interest in the history, culture, and current developments in the Islamic world.

Given Mizan's mandate to deploy scholarly expertise to illuminate events and phenomena pertaining to Islamic cultures, communities, and traditions—especially through analysis that provides historical context and fosters comparative inquiry—it has seemed particularly appropriate to devote our first issue to the subject of *The Islamic State in Historical and Comparative Perspective*. This is first and foremost due to the massive media profile of the ISIS movement, which combines features of an insurgency, terror network, and nation-state (at least aspirationally), with its ideology adroitly disseminated by an effective public relations machine skilled at exploiting both traditional and social media— particularly with gruesome acts of violence manipulated as political theater. ISIS' successes, both on the ground and as a media phenomenon, have catapulted it into the global spotlight, and its continuing cultural prominence calls for responsible scholarly commentary.

We have also felt that it is urgent to devote our first issue to analysis of the ISIS movement because of the specific nature of its ideology and claims, which reflect a complex, contentious, and highly problematic relationship to Islamic history and tradition—as demonstrated, for example, by its flag, which appropriates the image of the seal of the Prophet Muḥammad. ISIS appeals directly to the worldwide Muslim public by claiming to have revived the Sunni caliphate of old, positioning itself as the sole legitimate political and religious authority for the global Muslim community. Despite this claim to universality, the movement paradoxically rejects the communitarian ideal traditionally espoused by Sunnis in favor of a puritanical perfectionism; further, it unhesitatingly sanctions acts of extreme violence against fellow Muslims whom it deems to be apostates, heretics, or infidels—a posture typically associated only with the most radical sectarian formations within the Islamic fold. Claiming to represent true historical Islam, ISIS thus presents a lethal threat to any and all voices of dissent, while simultaneously reviving a wholly anachronistic vision of a jihad state based on conquest and domination, its military successes supposedly validating claims of divine favor and moral rectitude as they once did for caliphs who lived over a thousand years ago.

Some efforts to analyze the rise of ISIS and particular aspects of its ideology, especially its claim to revive long-forgotten but essential aspects of Islam, have been controversial specifically because of the problem of authenticity. What qualifies ISIS, or any other movement that seeks to mobilize elements of Islamic tradition for political ends, to justifiably claim to be a genuine revival of the caliphate or any other traditional Islamic institution? What position should a responsible scholar take vis-à-vis such claims? Are these assertions, however anachronistic or anomalous, as valid as those of any other group, given that scholars have long been accustomed to emphasizing that Islam is not a monolithic thing, but rather must be understood as a plurality of diverse and sometimes contradictory ideas and practices?<sup>3</sup> Or is the scholar obligated, particularly on moral grounds, to refute ISIS' claims as not only illegitimate but actually *un-Islamic*?

A major factor in such considerations is ISIS' almost unprecedented perpetration of startling acts of violence, overshadowing those of most terror organizations that previously enjoyed widespread media attention in ferocity and scope (except, perhaps, for the attacks committed by Al-Qa'idah against the United States on September 11, 2001). The persistence and brutality of ISIS' field campaigns and oppression of conquered populations in Iraq, the regularity of terror attacks in the West committed in its name over the last two years, and its gloating revival of slavery and calculated attacks on cultural heritage sites in the territory under its control have earned it a degree of infamy dwarfing even that of Osama bin Laden or the Taliban, whose strategy and tactics now seem, depressingly enough, far milder in comparison, and their ideology far less pernicious. While the Taliban and Al-Qa'idah compelled both scholars and spokespeople for the moderate Muslim majority to relativize their atavistic fundamentalism and global jihadism as marginal and aberrant, ISIS' commission of sadistic atrocities inspires even more energetic disavowals, provoking the question of whether some conceptions of Islam are so extreme as to be beyond the pale of what can justifiably be called Islam at all.

At least for a time, ISIS had significant success in recruiting fighters



to join its ranks in Iraq and Syria, primarily through its deft manipulation of social media to disseminate its slickly produced propaganda.<sup>4</sup> However, one might argue that this propaganda, projecting horrific imagery that seems to play on the world's collective nightmares about Islamist violence, has had an even greater impact in triggering extreme reactions from both government and populace in various Western countries. The recent rise to prominence of far-right groups and spokesmen throughout Europe and even America—where the formerly mainstream Republican Party has recently begun to openly indulge white supremacist, Christian Identity, and ethnonationalist constituencies to an unprecedented degree—has been encouraged by ISIS' visibility in the media landscape. ISIS' propaganda is clearly tailored to play upon Western fears of an imminent Islamic threat, seemingly confirmed by sporadic terror attacks in European and American cities—even though the bitter truth of the matter is that the victims of ISIS' terror campaigns are disproportionately Muslim by a very wide margin, their attacks on various communities in the Middle East having been vastly more devastating. Provocation of extreme responses in Europe and America—encouraging the perception of a state of ineluctable hostility between not only the West and the Islamic State but also majority populations and their Muslim minorities—may actually at this point be the primary function of the material generated and circulated by the ISIS propaganda office.

In the context of ever-escalating nativist and ethnonationalist rhetoric in Europe and America, it is disheartening to find voices in both traditional and new media claiming that ISIS is not marginal or anomalous at all, but rather *epitomizes* Islam—a claim that has provided significant traction and advantage in political campaigns for some organizations, even some in the mainstream, while also placing Muslim minorities at real risk of violence, not to mention providing justification for state-sponsored policies of discrimination and surveillance. ISIS' persistent claims that its operation has revived the traditional model of the caliph jihad state, including a number of long-abandoned practices, while repudiating virtually all of the common adjustments to modernity found in most contemporary Muslim communities worldwide, encourages pole-

micists' grotesque portrayal of the movement as 'real' Islam, and 'real' Islam as something essentially un-modern, uncivilized, and medieval.

Thus, for many scholars and spokespeople, it is not rejecting the actual practices and ideas associated with ISIS that is the problem, for even the most conservative Islamic state actors and community spokesmen throughout the world have not hesitated to disavow it completely. Rather, the problem is how to responsibly describe ISIS, for when craven fearmongers claim that it represents not an outlier but the very essence of Islam, it can be all too tempting to simply reject ISIS as a total aberration that has nothing whatsoever to do with 'real' Islam, and sweep the problematic implications of such categorical disavowal under the rug. It was exactly this tendency towards disavowal that Graeme Wood sought to address in his much-discussed piece for *The Atlantic*, which sought to locate ISIS in an overarching trajectory of contemporary Jihadi-Salafi thought with recognizable, albeit problematic, roots in certain aspects of the classical and medieval Islamic mainstream.<sup>5</sup>

The controversy raised by Wood's piece and other discussions of the ISIS phenomenon inspired a panel discussion on April 23, 2015 at the Pardee School for Global Studies of Boston University, "Interdisciplinary Approaches to the Islamic State." The papers from that panel provided the kernel of this, the first issue of *Mizan: Journal for the Study of Muslim Societies and Civilizations*. The need for nuanced, balanced, and sensitive discussion of critical issues pertaining to the background, ideology, and propaganda of the Islamic State has only intensified over the last sixteen months, particularly in the lead-up to the American presidential election. This issue seeks to address that need, at least in some small way.

### *Approaching ISIS in broad comparative perspective*

The visibility of ISIS, as well as the varied political and media responses to it in both the Western and the Islamic world, demands that scholars interrogate the complex intersections of historical memory (and amnesia), identity, religion, and politics that constellate in its claims

and actions. The articles in this issue of *Mizan* deal, for the most part, with analysis of primary texts associated with ISIS, especially its propaganda magazine *Dabiq*. In addition, some of them deal with aspects of the varied responses to ISIS and its claims. None of them deal with the scattered instances of small-scale coordinated terror attacks in Europe in 2015 or 2016, or with the so-called ‘lone wolf’ or ‘wannabe’ attacks perpetrated in the United States by individuals with no tangible connection to ISIS through conventional networks, yet who have justified acts of violence by claiming ‘inspiration’ by the movement or pledging allegiance to it. However, it is important to take note of these attacks, at least in passing, for they have given right-wing parties in both Europe and America the most fodder for ethnonationalist rhetoric, often taking on conspicuously racist, chauvinist, and imperialist forms that at times evoke not only traditional nationalist tropes, but also triumphalist Christianity. This has been particularly true in America, where Republican candidates for office have made implicit or explicit appeals to evangelical support on the one hand, and exploited the now-shopworn tropes of the post-9/11 security state on the other, sometimes combining them in curious and provocative ways.

It is clear that scholars have a responsibility to subject these phenomena to analysis of a comparative or contextualizing sort, particularly in the classroom or in public outreach settings, where opportunities to correct fallacious or pernicious misconceptions abound. For example, a logical fallacy we commonly encounter in media discussions of Islam is the tendency to absolutize it as essentially violent or essentially peaceful. Not only are religions as abstract concepts incapable of being aggressive or peaceable, of course, but even when we speak of Muslims as individuals and communities possessing full human agency, to attempt to characterize all Muslims as having one or another personal quality, political orientation, or moral disposition is, of course, ludicrous. Rather, as is the case with all religions, the textual and traditional sources of Islam offer rich resources for believers to articulate diverse positions.

Some of those positions have been more typical and deemed normative by consensus than others, to be sure. However, we must surely ack-

knowledge that tradition does provide a symbolic language to Muslims who seek to tighten the definition of who the real members of the community are, and thus supplies pretexts for fostering violence against those within the community who disagree with them. But insofar as such an insight implicitly challenges the position that ISIS has nothing to do with Islam—admittedly a farfetched claim—it is also useful to apply this insight more broadly, in seeking comparanda beyond the boundaries of Islam. Something that contemporary American polemicists fail to understand—or refuse to recognize—as they typify Islam as violent and Christianity as peaceful is that neither characterization holds up to close scrutiny. No religious tradition—or its all-too-human practitioners—can successfully avoid the extremes; no community on earth fails to encompass every human behavior possible. This is hardly an abstract observation; rather, direct historical evidence shows this to be true.

In my article in this issue of *Mizan*, I draw a direct parallel between the millenarian doctrine promoted in ISIS propaganda and that of a much older Islamic movement, that of the Fatimids, a Shi'i group that established a powerful caliphate that dominated North Africa and the Eastern Mediterranean for two hundred years. The similarities between the Fatimids and ISIS are striking, and this comparison is especially useful because of the distinct differences between them—separated by a thousand years, each arose under completely different political circumstances, the former as one of many radical Shi'i groups fostering rebellion against standing Sunni authorities, the latter as an offshoot of the Iraqi insurgency that draws on specific trends in late twentieth century ideologies of political Islam (especially the militant posture of contemporary Jihadi-Salafi groups).

But there have been numerous Islamic movements that espoused millenarian ideas in support of statebuilding projects like those of the Fatimids and ISIS—including the Abbasids, the classical form of the imperial caliphate *par excellence*; the Almohads, who dominated North Africa and Spain in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries; and, it seems, the early Muslim community under Muḥammad himself. The apparent

recurrence not only of apocalyptic but of apocalyptic specifically harnessed as a political ideology in Islamic tradition is a phenomenon that merits considerably more analysis. However, it must be emphasized that the exploitation of expectations of millenarian deliverance specifically as a means of legitimating an extreme sectarian position and violence against outsiders in the hopes of achieving a radical reconfiguration of society (or the world) has not been the exclusive purview of Muslim groups throughout history.<sup>6</sup>

For one thing, in their era, Islamic groups such as the Fatimids were hardly alone in embracing apocalypticism or claiming a millenarian role for their dominion. As Holland deftly demonstrates in his sweeping history of Europe and the Mediterranean in the tenth and eleventh centuries, Christian powers were repeatedly gripped with apocalyptic fervor at this time, and numerous statebuilding and imperial projects presented their military and political activities as hastening the coming of the Kingdom of God and the End Times. Holland's account shows that as the Millennium approached (whether interpreted as the thousand-year anniversary of Christ's birth or that of his resurrection instead), various regimes and potentates found the temptation to endow their claims to authority and pretexts for expansion with the halo of the numinous (and the inevitable) simply irresistible, and did so by smearing their opponents as Antichrist and presenting their own rule as hastening the Second Coming.<sup>7</sup> It is also noteworthy that at least some contemporary scholars have begun to emphasize the role of religiously sanctioned violence in the spread of Christianity in Europe, particularly during the Carolingian age, during which time Christianity was forcibly imposed upon Germanic and Nordic populations.<sup>8</sup> One recent attempt to demonstrate that this policy of aggressive subordination of pagans was a direct borrowing from Islam by Charlemagne himself has now been decisively refuted; there were ample factors present in Christian Frankish culture to account for the Carolingian 'jihad' as an internal development without, in effect, blaming it on Muslim 'influence.'<sup>9</sup>

The irony in all this is palpable. The creation of Europe as we know it—geographically, culturally, politically—was arguably the result of a

sequence of struggles at least partially inflected by millenarian beliefs, and indisputably the result of spreading Christianity by the sword. By contrast, a thousand years later, ISIS seek to unravel and ultimately erase the idolatrous legacies of European modernity—with its false gods of liberalism, tolerance, and church-state separation—by once again heralding the imminent advent of the apocalypse. But in doing so with the twin instruments of coercive violence and apocalyptic ideology, ISIS is not tapping into Islam’s medieval legacy; if anything, it is mirroring the troubled origins of Christian Europe.

Some might argue that the millenarianism and compulsion that marked medieval imperial projects in Europe were aberrant, not typical of or essential to ‘real’ Christianity. It is certainly extremely common to find ideologues drawing a negative comparison between Christianity and Islam on the basis of the contrast between the pacifism of Jesus on the one hand and Muhammad’s supposed resort to the sword on the other—the image of the founder thus supplying the ideal that defines the faith, however disparate the realities might be.<sup>10</sup> It may otherwise be argued that the appeal to apocalyptic and messianic rhetoric, or the resort to compulsion in the spread of Christendom, was superseded by the more enlightened and secular ideologies that motivate the political and military agendas of Western nation-states today. This is the crux of the common polemical claim that Islam remains backward and medieval while the West has progressed into modernity, despite the actual decline in secularism (at least in the United States)—the outlook that supposedly marks the absolute criterion of difference between a regressive Islam and Western modernity in discussions of Islam’s need for ‘reformation.’ However, it is not difficult to find contemporary Western analogues to this ‘medieval’ aspect of Islam as well.

For one thing, in the eyes of many Muslims, Western colonialism and imperialism have a distinctly religious aspect to them, even if many Europeans and Americans would disagree. The common denial of the association of Christianity with projects of domination, political expansion, slavery, even genocide, cannot withstand critical scrutiny; decades of deconstruction of the Bible and its use to promote such agendas pro-

vides ample evidence that the facile distinction between an Islam that is at its root diminished and invalidated by its association with the sword and a conveniently depoliticized Christianity simply does not hold up.<sup>11</sup>

This perspective is worth considering because some scholars and critics have suggested that the foreign policy of the powerful Western democracies in the twenty-first century, in particular the so-called War on Terror prosecuted by the United States and allies like the United Kingdom, displays aspects of the very apocalyptic millenarianism that is supposedly eschewed by the modern secular state—and that America supposedly seeks to combat in ISIS.

Northcott's study *An Angel Directs the Storm* offers a potent critique of the messianic underpinnings of the War on Terror during the Bush administration: the apocalyptic imperialism that shaped policy; the anti-democratic drive to consolidate power in the hands of the executive branch to support an absolute struggle against America's enemies; and the relentless expansion of a frontier marked by violent confrontation that continues to justify keeping America on a perpetual war footing today. Northcott argues that the administration played on a new interpretation of the Christian "Kingdom of God" as a divinely-ordained mission in pursuit of global hegemony, one that was secular in orientation, at least on the surface, but that drew on ancient and perennially effective appeals to Christian triumphalism.<sup>12</sup>

Northcott's work complements Lincoln's compelling study of the use of religion in American political rhetoric at the outset of the War on Terror. Lincoln's analysis of the speeches of Osama Bin Laden and George W. Bush on October 7, 2001 reveals the deep religious subtexts of both; in particular, Lincoln's deft deconstruction exposes Bush's subtle appeal to evangelical Christian supporters through carefully coded evocations of eschatological, providential, and messianic concepts.<sup>13</sup> Given the tragic history of American military interventions into Muslim societies in the last fifteen years, the rhetoric of a millenarian caliphate like ISIS, with its clear goal of legitimating state violence, is in the final analysis not so different from the neoliberal messianism used to authorize contemporary Western imperialism and state terror—enabling the paradoxical claim

to safeguard the world for freedom and democracy through bombing campaigns, drone strikes, and military occupation.

The millenarianism of official organs of the American state is at most only implicit: Lincoln is at pains to point out that the evangelical messaging embedded in Bush's speeches was carefully telegraphed to supporters sensitive and sympathetic to it, but remained covert in order to avoid openly promoting such ideas, since this would have corroded the administration's legitimacy in the eyes of secular-minded Americans. However, other elements in the American political system, particularly Republicans less concerned with alienating the secular mainstream and more concerned with securing the support of the evangelical base, have in recent years come to a more or less open embrace of apocalypticism. Thus, in spring 2015, former Representative and Tea Party activist Michele Bachmann (R-MN) gave multiple interviews to right-wing Christian media outlets opining that the Rapture was imminent, a direct result of the Obama administration's impending nuclear deal with Iran, as well as the advances made toward the universal legalization of gay marriage in America.<sup>14</sup> This can hardly be considered a fringe tendency when such ideas are openly espoused by members of Congress or the surrogates of contenders for a major party nomination for candidacy for the American presidency, seeking to stoke evangelical support by promising a quasi-messianic return to a theocratic utopia should their candidacy prove successful.<sup>15</sup>

In this, the Tea Party appears to be as conspicuously sectarian as ISIS—if perhaps ultimately less successful in establishing itself as a major player in national or international politics. It may be easy for many Americans to dismiss these ideas as fringe and unworthy of serious attention in comparison to those parallel views which seem to have had much greater impact in inspiring ISIS. But one cannot ignore the fact that such political millenarianism has traction for certain constituencies under certain political circumstances, and that the success of one group and the marginality of another may be determined, in the final analysis, by differing material, political, and social conditions—and not much else. Millenarian views may not be as widespread in America as they are in



Iraq, but they certainly are widespread; that a fringe apocalyptic group has not seized control of the United States government as ISIS has sought to wrest control of Iraq from the current regime surely reflects America's economic prosperity, institutional stability, and the continuing durability of its civil society, and not an intrinsic immunity to extremist belief systems grounded in a selective reading of aspects of its majority religion.

One might argue that when American politicians make explicit religious appeals to their supporters, they are simply playing to the heavily millenarian belief system openly embraced by Christian evangelicals, including the religious or quasi-religious Zionism that is a mainstay of contemporary Republican ideology. Promoting this worldview also has the felicitous benefit of exploiting a kind of Manichaeian belief in a world dominated by the struggle between good and evil; this has clear utility as a form of political theater that plays well in the American media and appeals to a certain demographic. But reducing this to mere theater or propaganda in no way reduces the validity of comparison with ISIS: we know nothing of its leaders' convictions, only what forms of rhetoric seem to have appeal for their supporters and the types of discourse that prove effective for recruitment.

Moreover, the embrace of a radical dualism that reduces problems to a fundamental, even cosmic, struggle between good and evil is especially beneficial for an opposition group that is primarily concerned with harnessing anti-establishment hostility to promote their agenda, and is for the most part largely unconcerned with the pragmatic considerations of actual governance.<sup>16</sup> The simplistic ideology of ISIS that flattens the world, rendering the complexities of global politics into a struggle between a pure Muslim elite and a host of threats from both insiders and outsiders, is much more effective as a recruiting tool for a disillusioned and alienated fringe of Muslim society—especially individuals already prone to violence—and much less effective as an ethos that can sustain a stable statebuilding enterprise. This is equally true for the Christian dualism evoked by some American politicians, similarly grounded in end of the world fantasies; it is far easier to blame a complex, chaotic world on outsiders or diabolical forces than it is to confront the public with

uncomfortable truths about problems that require resourcefulness and complex, difficult solutions.

This is precisely why the right wing in American politics that embraces millenarianism stridently denies the reality of climate change, insofar as this is an explanatory mechanism for global problems that is not only grounded in science (and not the supernatural) but that calls for accountability on the part of citizens and institutions alike. Insofar as the problems at hand have been caused by our own overconsumption, overpopulation, and overtaxing of the world's limited natural resources, with corporations and public institutions entirely complicit in making the problems worse, a Manichaeian-style dualism is hardly adequate for coming to grips with the problem in a realistic fashion.<sup>17</sup> Here we come full circle, for the Syrian political crisis that led to the country's decline into civil war in 2011—and thus enabled the rise of ISIS—was allegedly preceded and triggered by a climate-related crisis, stemming directly from the unrest and instability that were repercussions of a drought that wracked the country from 2006 to 2009, displacing hundreds of thousands of people and causing millions of livestock animals to perish of starvation and thirst, abandoned by farmers who had no choice but to flee to already overcrowded and overtaxed urban areas.<sup>18</sup>

Further, one can hardly maintain that 'radical Islam' has a monopoly on the use of divisive language of radical 'othering' such as we observe ISIS using in its propaganda, designed to legitimate the oppression and victimization of its fellow Muslims. British Prime Minister David Cameron's reference to ISIS as a "death cult" was admirably motivated by a desire to distance the extreme acts of the movement from ordinary Muslim citizens—essentially operationalizing the critique of ISIS as beyond the pale of true Islam as an aspect of public relations and government policy. But the invocation of the language of 'cult' specifically is ironic given the background of this term in historical Euro-American responses to alternative religious formations, particularly movements that tend towards more extreme expressions of eschatological fervor. Scholars of religion no longer use 'cult' as a reliable descriptive term; rather, it is now widely recognized as a political construct intended to mark a group

not only as deviant but subject to extreme sanction by government agencies (the Branch Davidians of Waco being the most obvious example). The language of ‘terror’ serves much the same purpose.

While American and British administrations may mean well in seeking to delineate ‘real’ Islam from deviants who commit violence in its name, the disquieting consequence is that the state takes on the responsibility of arbitrating in such matters, arrogating to itself the role of deciding which forms of religiosity are or are not legitimate—with life and death often literally hanging in the balance. Just as ISIS uses coded language to mark Shi’ah and noncompliant Sunnis as infidels whose blood can legitimately be shed, the use of the language of ‘cult’—especially ‘death cult’—seems tailored to prepare the public for absolute war against the implacable evil of ISIS, without regard for the potential cost in civilian casualties. (Ironically, the relentlessly apocalyptic vision presented by speakers at the Republican National Convention in July 2016 prompted one commentator to characterize the Republican Party itself as a kind of death cult.<sup>19</sup>)

Exposing the historical connections between Christianity, ideologies of imperialism and triumphalism, and the fostering of discursive and bodily violence against various ‘others’ is hardly necessary to establish a moral basis for objecting to such positions. But it is perhaps important to explicitly articulate that the historical and contemporary association of Christianity with empire-building and the legitimation of violence does not constitute a refutation of Christian principles as expressed by the majority of Christians, let alone justify marginalizing people who embrace its tenets. It is self-evident, even banal, to note that the same consideration should apply to Muslims. But even-handed approaches to and representations of Islam continue to be frustratingly elusive in the current American political environment, in which calls for the closing of the borders to Muslims and even oaths of loyalty and “shari’ah bans” have come from some of the most high-profile politicians associated with the Republican Party.<sup>20</sup>

Another irony emerges here, for the political discourse and strategic communications that have emerged around the Republican candidate

for president in the 2016 campaign mimics that of ISIS in disturbing ways. Donald Trump's campaign—and Republican cadres in general—seek to mobilize support among right-leaning constituencies through indulging in extreme nativist and xenophobic rhetoric. They present a worldview in which such supposedly distinctly American values such as freedom and democracy are wholly incommensurable with Islam, and thus imply an ongoing state of potential, and at times actual, hostility between America and the Muslim world, supposedly typified by radical movements such as ISIS (and supposedly confirmed by the actions of lone wolf radicals such as the Orlando and San Bernadino shooters). In defiance of the increasing aversion in official channels to indulging in damaging 'Clash of Civilization'-type rhetoric or typifying the actions of marginal groups and individuals as characteristic of all Muslims, the Trump campaign and its proxies insist on depicting 'radical Islam' as an existential threat, a tactic that is the functional equivalent of ISIS' attempts to exacerbate tensions between Western societies and their Muslim minority populations. Both seek to alienate Muslims from their home societies in Europe and America and exploit anxieties about irreconcilable conflict for political advantage.<sup>21</sup>

Similarly, the media proxies of the Trump campaign have elaborated a complex coded language that is in its own way just as strongly sectarian as that found in ISIS propaganda, designed to promote an image of insiders as virile, prosperous victors and opponents as servile, submissive, emasculated, and ripe for defeat. This is an extension of the type of rhetoric the candidate himself uses even in day-to-day speech, like his frequent reference to critics, especially women, as 'disgusting'; the political implications of the imagery of bodily revulsion as a form of total rejection has been widely remarked in a variety of contexts.<sup>22</sup> The official and unofficial organs of the Trump campaign valorize aggressive, even predatory behavior: on social media, supporters are termed 'centipedes,' playing upon the insect's capacity for stealthy, venomous attacks against its prey.<sup>23</sup> As was widely documented during early 2016, the candidate himself repeated encouraged violence against protestors at his rallies during the primary campaign. Online, his joke about turning protestors out into the cold

without their coats has been turned by his proxies and supporters into a trope, with ‘give the man a coat’ becoming a compliment, based on the idea of stealing said coat from anyone who opposes or criticizes him.

Further, the gloating, gendered triumphalism of ISIS and its spokesmen—who mock their opponents as “quasi-men,” even when they are (purportedly) women<sup>24</sup>—is echoed in the hypermasculine discourse of Trump supporters on social media, where the default term for Trump’s opponents is “cuck” (short for cuckold), with the intentionally degrading and racist associations sometimes left implicit, and sometimes not. The use of this term seems to have originated a number of years ago with the coinage “cuckservative,” an insult applied to Republicans deemed insufficiently conservative (similar to the code word RINO, “Republican In Name Only”), but “cuck” has quickly been expanded from being a term of internal critique within the Republican fold to being more widely applied, especially to liberals and socialists, who supposedly epitomize the self-abnegating, humiliating posture the term is meant to capture.<sup>25</sup> The open chauvinism of the candidate himself, as well as the puerile and hypersexualized behavior of many of his supporters, led many to question the sincerity of his attempt to represent himself as the champion of gay Americans after the June 2016 Orlando shooting; given the policies Republicans openly endorse, as well as the cultural climate they foster, it is implausible that a Trump presidency would do much to benefit LGBTQ citizens.<sup>26</sup>

Perhaps the most bizarre turn in the 2016 campaign has been the overt turn to explicitly religious language, especially attempts to literally demonize the opposition. Trump has repeatedly made allegations about Hillary Clinton’s corruption and criminality (leading to the recurring rallying cry of “Lock her up!” at his events, as well as insinuations by his proxies that she will be tried and executed upon Trump’s inauguration as president), but this has recently escalated to a straightforward claim that Clinton is literally the Devil.<sup>27</sup> This sort of name-calling is unprecedented in modern American presidential campaigns; the Trump campaign’s capacity to vilify the opposition seems limitless, as, for example, when the candidate himself repeatedly asserted that Obama and Clinton

were the literal founders of ISIS, only significantly later downplayed as a sarcastic rhetorical move.<sup>28</sup> Such rhetoric obviously plays to the enthusiasms of the Republican base, at the very least granting the candidate political traction among a vocal minority who indulge in fantasies of incarcerating or even executing Clinton.

This rhetoric has a subtler effect as well, in that it serves to locate the candidate in the camp of those fervent Christians who see in Barack Obama in particular and the Democratic Party in general a concerted campaign against their religion; the open indulgence in religious rhetoric of a theatrically excessive but symbolically resonant sort implies a similarity in worldview to those who already read partisan political struggles in theological terms. This alignment of the Trump campaign with right-leaning Christians—despite the candidate’s historically profane character and questionable personal rectitude—has also been encouraged by his hinting at a willingness to repeal firewall laws protecting the separation of church and state such as the Johnson Amendment. The alliance with evangelical elements eager to gain political advantage by allying themselves with Trump has proceeded to such a degree that, in breaking with the well-established tradition of pastoral neutrality in public political settings, the benediction delivered by the Reverend Mark Burns on the opening night of the Republican National Convention explicitly called on God’s assistance to defeat the “enemy”—openly specified as Clinton and the Democratic Party—while referring to the gathered assembly as “the conservative party under God” and praying for “power and authority” to be bestowed on Trump.<sup>29</sup> The energetic vilification of political rivals in openly religious terms is of course a staple of ISIS propaganda; a particularly striking parallel appears in ISIS’ attacks on Jabhat al-Nuṣrah, upon whom ISIS spokesmen literally called down the curse of God in a dispute with their former allies.<sup>30</sup>

Extending our comparative analysis still further, if we seek to consider with equanimity all worldviews that emphasize the categorical boundaries between insiders and outsiders, investment in a messianic figure and anticipation of imminent and final judgment that will usher in a new golden age, a radical embrace of violence, and a reliance on

scriptural themes, especially symbols and code-words, then these traits appear to describe not only ISIS but also certain virulent fringe elements in contemporary Judaism as well. The fact that most historical Jewish communities have not had access to state power has tended to impede recognition of the importance of holy war traditions in Judaism, although the work of Firestone in particular has done much to correct the misconception that Jews have not articulated religious justifications for violence.<sup>31</sup> Likewise, for complex political reasons, the significance of Jewish terrorist movements in modern history is seldom recognized, and terrorism does not occupy the same place in discussions of contemporary Judaism that it does in discussions of contemporary Islam—despite its significance in certain contexts, in particular the foundation of the state of Israel.<sup>32</sup> Thus, locutions such as ‘violent Zionism’ or ‘radical Judaism’ have nowhere near the same currency among Western commentators on Middle Eastern politics (let alone the general public) as ‘radical Islam’ and other expressions of that sort.

Nevertheless, it is clear that in the modern era certain actors have invoked Judaism, a tradition typically presented as exempt from such tendencies, to support radically exclusionary ideologies of a messianic nature, to not only foster violence against dehumanized outsiders, but to support expansionist political projects. A particular disposition to such radical ideology can be seen in certain wings of the Israeli settler movement, which justifies expansionism through such religiously-inflected conceptions as the “redemption of the land.”<sup>33</sup> Further, both Firestone and Claussen have written about the significance of the thought of Yitzḥaq Ginsburgh in supporting the ideology of what we might call the Jewish jihadist fringe of the settler movement operating in the Occupied Territories, often committing violence in the name of Judaism, and often with impunity.

Ginsburgh’s teachings are of particular interest because of the way in which he amalgamates biblical narratives and symbols with a virulent political message, reminiscent of ISIS’ use of Qur’ānic themes and images drawn from early Islamic history. Thus, following the reading of the notorious right-wing rabbi Meir Kahane, Ginsburgh holds up Pinḥas, the

grandson of Aaron who zealously killed a fellow Israelite and the Midianite woman with whom he illicitly consorted (Numbers 25), as an ideal for faithful Jews to emulate. Interpreting the kabbalistic principle of *tiqqūn ʿōlam* ('repairing the world') as a mandate to undertake unconventional, even extreme, behavior to defend the Jewish people and sanctify their homeland, Ginsburgh and other figures of the Zionist ultra-right invoke this principle to justify the forced expulsion and killing of Arabs not only on grounds of self-defense or for the sake of national self-determination, but even as a holy act.<sup>34</sup>

These ideas do not appear in a vacuum, of course; rather, they present only the most explicitly religious justifications for violence on the part of state and quasi-state actors in Israel, particularly in contested areas such as the Occupied Territories—the main arena for Israeli expansion through settler groups acting as state proxies. Thus, Kahane's ideas inspired Baruch Goldstein (whom Ginsburgh has openly defended), the perpetrator of the Cave of the Patriarchs massacre in 1994 in Hebron. Of course, the majority of Israelis would reject Ginsburgh's ideology as a perversion of Judaism—just as the vast majority of Muslims abhor ISIS' distortion of Islam. The difference in media representation could not be more stark, however: ISIS is presented as a virtually existential threat to Western democracy and freedom (and implicitly, to American hegemony in the Middle East); by contrast, the settler movement is only infrequently mentioned in the media, and the virulent aspects of the ideology of settlers is seldom acknowledged, despite the considerable impact the movement has had—and continues to have—on Israeli politics, demographic and political realities in the Occupied Territories, and thus, at least indirectly, on American policy and interests in the region.<sup>35</sup>

Perhaps the most significant counterargument to claims by Western analysts that the ISIS phenomenon represents something pernicious within Islam's essence, a pathological tendency towards violence that marks an absolute distinction between Christianity and Islam, or 'Western civilization' and Islam, is presented by the phenomenon of American Christian jihad. Over the last two years, a number of journalists have reported on the Dwekh Nawshā, a Christian militia fighting ISIS in the



northern Iraqi theater of war. What is significant about this militia group is that although it is primarily made up of Assyrian Christians native to the area acting in support of the larger and better organized Kurdish peshmurga, like ISIS, they have attracted a small group of foreign fighters as well, and these have predominantly been Americans, most of them with genuine military experience.

Many of the Americans who affiliate themselves with Dwekh Nawshā as volunteers express a combination of religious and political motivations for their immigrating to the theater of war. They often seem to construe their actions as defensive, though this is how Muslim jihadists have always presented their emigration (hijrah) to fight in various hot-spots around the world where Islam is perceived as being under attack, whether it is Afghanistan, Bosnia, Chechnya, or now Iraq and Syria.<sup>36</sup> It is unclear whether these American jihadists mean to martyr themselves as many of ISIS' fighters do, though the name of the group is telling in this regard; dwekh nawshā means 'self-sacrifice' in Aramaic, and some of the American fighters mix militant nationalism and Christian religious symbolism in their self-presentation, though the Dwekh Nawshā organization itself (which also labels itself the Assyrian Army) seems to eschew explicitly Christian imagery. Notably, even though the media coverage of foreign fighters from the United States often implies that their efforts are futile or even foolhardy, their motivations are typically portrayed in a positive light, especially through an emphasis on their desire to contribute to defending Christians against Islamic aggression. They are never recognized as another aspect of the original imperialist project that established an American presence in Iraq and Afghanistan—the theaters in which most of these foreign fighters first acquired military experience and expertise.<sup>37</sup>

The relationship between the various elements I have drawn together here is sometimes unclear. For example, not all apocalyptic movements necessarily embrace violence, though they often seem prone to this—or are at least prone to be exploited to foment and justify violence. Not all are expansionist or even inclined towards collective political or

military action, though many of them certainly are. Perhaps it is that apocalypticism is such a useful instrument for constraining and redirecting social elements prone to violence that it has simply been expedient for expansionist states to attempt to harness it. Whatever the case, one thing is clear: Islam is not the only one of the monotheistic traditions in which combinations of violence, millenarianism, and a radically exclusionary ideology has been used to drive military action in support of political projects. ISIS is perhaps unusual in the extremity of its views and in combining a number of different elements in its ideology, but as I have shown, there is considerable overlap between its rhetoric and propaganda and that of other groups and movements throughout history. Upon deeper analysis, we find that no community is completely exempt from apocalyptic or hypermilitant tendencies, or lacking members who seek religious justifications for their extreme acts. We should thus seek explanations for the emergence and popularization of radical ideology not in the 'essence' or roots of a religion, but rather in the material causes and particular circumstances that engender it, and drive some believers to marshal whatever resources their religion might offer to support and legitimize violence.

#### *Contributions to this issue*

The articles included in this issue primarily stem from the aforementioned panel held at the Pardee School for Global Studies at Boston University in April 2015, "Interdisciplinary Approaches to the Islamic State." Kecia Ali, Thomas Barfield, and myself presented early versions of our articles as papers on that panel, and Jessica Stern, Franck Salameh, and Kenneth Garden not only responded to our respective papers, but have also been kind enough to rework their comments into brief response papers that have also been included here. The additional articles, one by Jeffrey Bristol and another by Tazeen Ali and Evan Anhorn, were submitted for inclusion in the issue later. Overall, these articles represent diverse approaches to the ISIS movement, its rhetoric, and its relationship both

to historical aspects of Islam and contemporary social and political expressions of Muslim belief, including responses to the claims and actions of ISIS itself.

Although there have been a number of publications on ISIS over the last two years, most of the peer-reviewed scholarship on the phenomenon has come from policy-oriented disciplines such as Political Science, International Relations, and so forth. We believe that this issue fills a conspicuous gap in the existing literature in offering scholarly perspectives from the Humanities and Social Sciences, particularly Religious Studies, History, and Anthropology. The offerings here are deliberately eclectic, united mainly by their common interest in interrogating not just the claims and ideology of the Islamic State, but the critical issues pertinent to the study of Islamic tradition and Muslim history and culture that are raised by such inquiry.

Kecia Ali's contribution, "Redeeming Slavery: The 'Islamic State' and the Quest for Islamic Morality," examines the contrasting claims of ISIS propaganda on the one hand and the "Open Letter to Al-Baghdadi" on the other on the question of the permissibility of slavery—one defining the practice as essentially un-Islamic, the other as *paradigmatically* Islamic. Ali demonstrates that a number of critical questions converge on this issue, including the cultural and political contexts in which sexual violence is categorized and represented and how tradition may be defined and contested through attempts to delineate what is or is not "Islamic." Notably, although ISIS propaganda approaches slavery as an indelible and essential part of Islam, its approach to the juristic issues raised by the practice, of which ISIS' audience is inevitably ignorant, actually underscores slavery's anomalous nature. Jessica Stern's brief response to this article explicitly challenges the claim that ISIS' violation of standards of international law, morality, and common decency must be defined as 'Islamic' simply on the basis of the group's use of sacred texts and reference to tradition to legitimize them; she points out that this is a strategy that many different sorts of radicals, including Jewish and Christian radicals, adopt to

justify extreme acts and cloak them in the veneer of tradition. Deeper investigation of ISIS' practices of organized rape and plunder shows that they do not necessarily stem from an ideological core, but rather help the group to fulfill specific pragmatic and programmatic goals.

In my article "ISIS, Eschatology, and Exegesis," I attempt to place aspects of the use of tradition in ISIS propaganda in deeper historical context, comparing the interpretation of specific qur'ānic *topoi*, particularly Noah's Ark, in *Dabiq*, the ISIS propaganda magazine, with that found in the propaganda of the Fatimid Empire. Although the Fatimid dominion flourished a thousand years ago, the comparison of ISIS with this Isma'ili Shi'ite state is productive insofar as it shows that groups adopting a radical sectarian position, especially by seeking to foment violence against their fellow Muslims in the pursuit of statebuilding projects, must employ a specific kind of reading strategy—a sectarian hermeneutic—in deploying the Qur'ān and symbols and themes from Islamic history to support their positions. The comparison of the early Fatimids and ISIS yields especially compelling results given that both groups support an extreme sectarian ideology with the claim of fulfilling prophecy by bringing events in an apocalyptic timetable to pass. The point is not to paint ISIS as somehow crypto-Shi'ite, but rather to delineate a specific kind of sectarian logic that shapes particular ideological claims and tends to rely on particular methods. As Kenneth Garden emphasizes in his commentary on my piece, *pace* those who seek to depict ISIS as representing true or essential Islam, the group actually employs reading practices that not only legitimate the use of violence against other Muslims but openly confirm its minority status, even celebrating it; ISIS spokesmen at one and the same moment accept that most of their coreligionists reject their message and exploit this fact as confirmation of their role as harbingers of the End Times.

The next contribution in this issue, "ISIS: The Taint of Murji'ism and the Curse of Hypocrisy" by Jeffrey Bristol, focuses on the background and development of a single aspect of ISIS' messaging in its propaganda, namely its reliance on the codeword "Murji'ite" in its polemic against

the Muslim mainstream. In fulminating against Murji'ism as a supposedly perennial heresy in Islamic history, ISIS propagandists skillfully draw on a traditional set of ideas and claims about this oft-maligned school of thought—including recent developments in jihadist ideology antedating the emergence of ISIS—and take them in new directions. The specter of Murji'ism becomes an evocative, multifaceted instrument in ISIS' sectarian toolbox, serving the especially critical function of casting mainstream, accommodationist Muslims who refuse to align themselves with ISIS and its extreme positions as themselves members of a heretical group, the authenticity of whose Islam is supposedly questionable.

Thomas Barfield's "The Islamic State as an Empire of Nostalgia" places ISIS in the broadest possible context, analyzing its caliphate as an exemplary case of a type of secondary empire that seeks to propagate its authority not on the basis of controlling significant territory or resources, but rather by capitalizing on the claim to have restored institutions associated with an alluring golden age. The symbolic self-presentation of the ISIS caliphate evokes precursors from Islamic history, particularly the Abbasid dynasty, during whose rule the imperial hegemony of Islam was at its most robust. Barfield specifically contrasts ISIS' strategic appeal to this older caliphal golden age, at once political and religious in nature, with the secular state ideology of the Ba'ath and other groups that dominated the Arab-Islamic world during the flourishing of the nation-state system throughout the Middle East in the twentieth century. The appeal to a transnational Islamic identity has been crucial for ISIS' attraction of foreign fighters to its cause, transcending the narrower interests more directly in play in the Syrian conflict and the domestic struggles that have wracked Iraq since the withdrawal of American forces in 2007. In his response, however, Franck Salameh cautions us to recognize that the appeal to an Islamic golden age has always undergirded the supposedly secular ideology of modern Arab nationalism, which long capitalized upon a form of nostalgia for Islam as the essence of Arab identity and its empire as the apogee of Arab accomplishment.

Finally, "ISIL and the (Im)permissibility of Jihad and *Hijrah*," co-authored by Tazeen Ali and Evan Anhorn, adopts yet another perspective

on the Islamic State phenomenon, again by bringing ISIS propaganda into conversation with the “Open Letter to Al-Baghdadi.” Taking a different approach than that adopted in Kecia Ali’s discussion, the authors examine these documents as evidence of the larger problems attendant on the question of Muslim belonging in Western states. They argue that both ISIS and Western groups (including Western state authorities) play upon Western Muslims’ anxieties about their place in American or European society and construct different but analogous ideals of Muslim identity: ISIS presents allegiance to its cause and disavowal of citizenship in Western democratic states as a necessary criterion of Muslim identity, while Western states and media impose a requirement of absolute disavowal of ISIS and public or semi-public expressions of loyalty and patriotism upon its Muslim citizens. In the latter case, this has the effect of delimiting the permissible parameters of political discourse, making social trust contingent upon an admission that religion is the ultimate wellspring of conflict—that is, that conflict stems from Islam, or bad interpretations of Islam, rather than from material, political, or societal causes. Notably, the authors draw upon the classic theories of the sociologist Max Weber concerning the role of charisma and institutionalization in society, contrasting the charismatic claims of ISIS with the reconfiguration of charisma in the cultural and institutional resources that Muslim communities may draw upon in articulating a unique and stable place in Western civil society.

In these articles, no attempt has been made to unify terminology. We have permitted the contributors to select whatever nomenclature for the entity that calls itself *al-dawlah al-islamiyyah fi'l-‘irāq wa’l-shām* (the Islamic State of/in Iraq and Greater Syria) they believe is best (e.g. ISIS, ISIL, the Islamic State, *Daesh*, etc.) While steps have been taken to ensure that ISIS publications are cited responsibly, especially for the purpose of exposing the movement’s claims to critical analysis, on account of their nature as political propaganda of an aggressive state that has violated international law repeatedly in supporting or directly perpetrating terrorism, human trafficking, and destruction of cultural heritage, we do not provide direct links to the online sources of these

publications. The Clarion Project ([www.clarionproject.org](http://www.clarionproject.org)) archives ISIS publications in English; further, original translations of materials pertaining to ISIS, including transcripts of videos and other media materials, can be found at [www.jihadology.net](http://www.jihadology.net).

## Notes

All digital content cited in this article was last accessed via the URLs provided in the notes below on October 21, 2020.

1. Earlier drafts of this material were reviewed by Ken Garden, Will McCants, and Stephen Shoemaker, and later versions by Megan Goodwin, Kecia Ali, Olga Davidson, and Elizabeth Pregill. Their advice has been invaluable in helping me to shape what this essay has become. Naturally, I am responsible for the faults and flaws that remain.

2. This has not occurred spontaneously, of course; as Bail and others have observed, significant moneyed interests exert a titanic influence on American perceptions of Islam, particularly by manipulating media representation of current events to fit well-established and highly prejudicial narratives about Muslims: see Christopher Bail, *Terrified: How Anti-Muslim Fringe Organizations Became Mainstream* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2014). The work of Bail is especially useful insofar as much of the literature on Islamophobia addresses cultural attitudes, social dynamics, and media representation, but overlooks the specific institutional contexts in which ideas and images about Muslims are actually generated and disseminated.

3. The conception of “Islam” as essentially undefinable and comprehensible only as a body of concepts, practices, and discursive positions vis-à-vis a highly malleable and selectively accessed tradition is most closely associated with Talal Asad; see his recent methodological statement “The Idea of an Anthropology of Islam,” *Qui Parle* 17 (2009): 1–30.

4. ISIS’ media output seems to have been most robust during the year from spring 2014 to spring 2015 when both its recruitment of fighters on the ground in Iraq and Syria and its military advances were most successful. For various reasons, its media output has actually declined since then, although its profile in the Western media has seemingly increased in response to the sporadic terror attacks that have been perpetrated in its name (or at least for which its spokesmen



have sought to take credit). See Aaron Zelin, “ICSR Insight: The Decline in Islamic State Media Output,” *ICSR.info*, April 12, 2015 (<https://icsr.info/2015/12/04/decline-islamic-state-media-output/>).

5. Graeme Wood, “What ISIS Really Wants,” *The Atlantic*, March 2015. Most of the contributions to this issue, including my own, address the problem of nomenclature and characterization from a variety of angles; many of them cite the controversy over Wood’s article as a touchstone for navigating these issues. For two radically different opinions on the problems provoked by ISIS’ very name, compare William McCants and Shadi Hamid, “John Kerry Won’t Call the Islamic State by its Name Anymore. Why That’s Not a Good Idea,” *Brookings.edu*, December 29, 2014 (<https://www.brookings.edu/opinions/john-kerry-wont-call-the-islamic-state-by-its-name-anymore-why-thats-not-a-good-idea/>) and Carl Ernst, “Why ISIS Should Be Called Daesh: Reflections on Religion & Terrorism,” *ISLAMICcommentary*, November 11, 2014 (<https://soundcloud.com/dukeislamicstudiescenter/carl-ernst-why-isis-should-be-called-daesh-reflections-on-religion-and-terrorism>). For a compelling argument as to why the use of the label “Islamic” matters, see Shahab Ahmed, *What Is Islam? The Importance of Being Islamic* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2016), 106-107.

6. There is copious scholarly literature on the conjunction of apocalypticism and violence in the contemporary world; cf., e.g., the classic account of John R. Hall with Philip D. Schuyler and Sylvaine Trinh, *Apocalypse Observed: Religious Movements and Violence in North America, Europe, and Japan* (London: Routledge, 2000). For a recent account that takes a broadly historical comparative approach similar to that I have sought to adopt here, see Catherine Wessinger, “Apocalypse and Violence,” in John J. Collins (ed.), *The Oxford Handbook of Apocalyptic Literature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 422-440. Wessinger’s treatment attempts to delineate the common discursive and sociological elements that tie together phenomena as diverse as qur’ānic apocalypticism, contemporary jihadism, the Crusades, Anabaptist Münster, Christian Zionism, and the Branch Davidians.

7. More than one review of Holland's work accuses him of reducing the religious motivations of European monarchs and churchmen who employed millenarian rhetoric simply to *Realpolitik*, criticizing his approach to the religious justifications for various political projects around the year 1000 as reductionist. For a particularly transparent example written for a website affiliated with the Christian Dominionist movement, see Lee Duigon, "A Review of *The Forge of Christendom*," Chalcedon, n.d. (<https://chalcedon.edu/resources/articles/a-review-of-the-forge-of-christendom/>). The accusation of reductionism seems to be a common trope levied against studies that expose Christianity's tendency to be exploited as a political ideology as opposed to approaching the subject with concern for the sincere religious convictions of the individuals involved, but naturally those advocating such an approach to the historiography of European Christendom do not extend such courteous consideration to Muslim jihadists.

Notably, after Holland's work was published, the thesis that the First Crusade was specifically motivated by belief in an immanent apocalypse was again advanced by Jay Rubenstein in his *Armies of Heaven: The First Crusade and the Quest for Apocalypse* (New York: Basic Books, 2011); Rubenstein's approach was widely criticized by historians on the grounds that religious motivations and eschatological or millenarian motivations do not at all amount to the same thing (see, e.g., the review of Jonathan Riley-Smith in *Catholic Historical Review* 98 [2012]: 786–787).

8. Robert Ferguson has emphasized the emergence of Viking warfare against specifically religious targets such as monasteries—the aspect of Viking raiding that has often been seen as most distinctive of the era, beginning with the attack on Lindisfarne in 793—as a deliberate response to the perceived threat of Frankish campaigns of violence initiated in the 770s that resulted in forced conversions (followed on some occasions by mass executions), imposition of the death penalty for defying Christian ordinances, and destruction of Saxon holy sites; see *The Vikings: A History* (New York: Viking, 2009), 41–57. Anders Winroth's recent *The Conversion of Scandinavia: Vikings, Merchants, and Missionaries in the Remaking of Northern*

*Europe* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2012) underscores the importance of both individual and communal agency in the spread of Christianity in Northern Europe, asserting that the conquest and forced conversion model does not account for the variety of motivations pagans had for accepting the new imperial faith. But the same is, of course, true for the spread of Islam.

9. See Yitzhak Hen, “Charlemagne’s Jihad,” *Viator* 37 (2006): 33–51 and the systematic critique of Daniel G. König, “Charlemagne’s ‘Jihād’ Revisited: Debating the Islamic Contribution to an Epochal Change in the History of Christianization,” *Medieval Worlds* 3 (2016): 3–40; see also the trenchant notes of Jonathan Jarrett posted on his blog, *A Corner of Tenth-Century Europe*, January 14, 2007 (<https://tenthmedieval.wordpress.com/2007/01/14/charlemagnes-jihad/>).

10. This is a polemical claim that has been made against Islam by Christian spokesmen at least since the ninth century, when it was initiated by Arabic-speaking apologists who were well versed in both the religious and historical traditions of Islam: see, e.g., Thomas Sizgorich, “Do Prophets Come with a Sword? Conquest, Empire, and Historical Narrative in the Early Islamic World,” *American Historical Review* 112 (2007): 993–1015.

11. For a convenient recent introduction to this topic, see the essays in C. L. Crouch and Jonathan Stökl (eds.), *In the Name of God: The Bible in the Colonial Discourse of Empire* (Leiden: Brill, 2014). See also now Erin Runion’s challenging study, *The Babylon Complex: Theopolitical Fantasies of War, Sex, and Sovereignty* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2014), which directly indicts the biblical foundations of the contemporary American drive to global political and economic domination.

12. Michael S. Northcott, *An Angel Directs the Storm: Apocalyptic Religion & American Empire* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2004), 103–133.

13. Bruce Lincoln, *Holy Terrors: Thinking about Religion after September 11* (2nd ed.; Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010), 19–31.

14. Brian Tashman, “Bachmann: Rapture Imminent Thanks to Gay Marriage & Obama,” *Right Wing Watch*, April 20, 2015 (<https://www.rightwingwatch.org/post/bachmann-rapture-imminent-thanks->

to-gay-marriage-obama/). The coincidence of an outbreak of right-wing intimations of imminent apocalypse in spring 2015 with growing awareness of the millenarian nature of ISIS ideology at that time is striking. Compare Edward L. Rubin, "Our End-of-the-World Obsession is Killing Us: Climate Denial and the Apocalypse, GOP-Style," *Salon*, March 26, 2015 ([https://www.salon.com/2015/03/26/our\\_end\\_of\\_the\\_world\\_obsession\\_is\\_killing\\_us\\_climate\\_denial\\_and\\_the\\_apocalypse\\_gop\\_style/](https://www.salon.com/2015/03/26/our_end_of_the_world_obsession_is_killing_us_climate_denial_and_the_apocalypse_gop_style/)), and the *Vox* interview with Will McCants published a week later, Zack Beauchamp, "ISIS is Really Obsessed with the Apocalypse," *Vox*, April 6, 2015 (<https://www.vox.com/2015/4/6/8341691/isis-apocalypse>). Commentators sometimes cite the dramatic rise in the belief that the End Times are imminent in Muslim societies over the last two decades, but these figures are seldom compared to similar rates of belief about the imminent Rapture among American Christians.

15. In the first quarter of 2016, with the intensification of the contest for the Republican presidential nomination, it was repeatedly reported that Ted Cruz's wife, Heidi, openly articulated a theocratic vision for the Cruz presidency to audiences of supporters; other proxies such as Glenn Beck and Cruz's father, Rafael, an evangelical preacher, reportedly promoted an understanding of Cruz as an 'anointed king' divinely appointed to shepherd America through the coming apocalyptic tribulations of the Rapture. See John Fea, "Ted Cruz's Campaign is Fueled by a Dominionist Vision for America," *Religion News Service*, February 4, 2016 (<https://religionnews.com/2016/02/04/ted-cruzs-campaign-fueled-dominionist-vision-america-commentary/>).

16. This point is borne out by the evidence: judging by any numbers of standards, the Tea Party-dominated Congress voted in during the 2010 elections was the least productive in American history.

17. Rubin, "Our End-of-the-World Obsession." Admittedly, the conviction that an irreversible environmental catastrophe is imminent sometimes appears like a rationalist alternative to apocalypticism. One might thus argue that when confronted with a chaotic world in which crisis is unavoidable, the observer naturally interprets the impending disaster through whichever explanatory mechanism is most appropriate

for their worldview, whether scientific or religious. Even doomsday scenarios of a rationalist or scientific nature may draw on symbols traditionally associated with religious narratives (see the cartoon by Tony Auth archived at <https://www.tonyauth.com/uncategorized/two-by-two-to-the-extent-possible/>).

18. The number of displaced villagers in Syria may have been as high as 1.5 million. See Henry Fountain, “Researchers Link Syrian Conflict to a Drought Made Worse by Climate Change,” *New York Times*, March 2, 2015. Admittedly, the drought hypothesis has been challenged, with some analysts arguing that there was no drought at all, and that the crisis was triggered instead by overpopulation and poor economic and agricultural policy (which are, admittedly, factors that are still decidedly environmental, and not ideological or religious, in nature); see, e.g., Roger Andrews, “Drought, Climate, War, Terrorism, and Syria,” *Energy Matters*, November 24, 2015 (<http://euanmearns.com/drought-climate-war-terrorism-and-syria/>).

19. Jeet Heer, “The GOP is the Party of Death,” *New Republic*, July 19, 2016 (<https://newrepublic.com/article/135232/gop-party-death>).

20. Donald Trump’s call for a ban on all Muslims seeking to enter the United States after the June 2016 Orlando shooting has been most widely discussed given his prominence as the then-presumptive and now current nominee for the Republican presidential ticket. The statements of former Speaker of the House Newt Gingrich at the same time, calling for nationwide screening of Muslims and expulsion of any who express a “belief in sharia”—a more pernicious proposal of equally dubious legality, and one that demonstrates a significant misapprehension of Muslim self-conception—received far less attention. See David A. Graham, “Gingrich’s Outrageous Call to Deport All Practicing U.S. Muslims,” *The Atlantic*, June 15, 2016.

21. On this, see especially the contribution of Tazeen Ali and Evan Anhorn to this issue.

22. E.g., Blake Leyerle, “Refuse, Filth, and Excrement in the Homilies of John Chrysostom,” *Journal of Late Antiquity* 2 (2009): 337–356. Leyerle emphasizes the potency of Chrysostom’s evocation of the horrible mater-

ial circumstances of urban waste disposal in his time (with which his audience was no doubt directly familiar) as a metaphor for moral corruption and defilement; he thus sought to create a visceral connection in his hearer's mind between the dubious morality of Jews and pagans and the physical disgust waste and offal would trigger in the viewer.

23. Trump himself being the centipede *par excellence*, according to a popular YouTube video that combined a narrative from a nature documentary with footage of Trump debating his opponents: "Despite its impressive length, it's a nimble navigator ... And some can be highly venomous. Just like the tarantula it's killing, the centipede has two curved hollow fangs, which inject paralyzing venom. The centipede is a predator," quoted in Almie Rose, "Decoding the Language of Trump Supporters," *Attn.com*, March 25, 2016 (<https://archive.attn.com/stories/6789/trump-supporters-language-reddit>).

24. E.g., 'Umm Sumayyah al-Muhājirah,' "Slave-Girls or Prostitutes?" *Dabiq* 9 (Sha'ban 1436 [May 2015]), 48. The context is already a hypersexualized one, given the topic at hand; the author contrasts the virile man of the Islamic State who follows divine law and lays claim to that which God has established as his prerogative to enjoy, sexual relations with a slave girl taken as spoils of battle, with the hypocritical 'quasi-man' who denounces slavery but slakes his lust with a prostitute, thereby committing the sin of fornication. See Kecia Ali's contribution to this issue.

25. Thus, "cuck" is regularly deployed as an epithet for Sanders and his supporters, meant to ridicule such concerns as income inequality and racial justice as effeminate. Transference of the term from Republicans to Democrats is not surprising given the popularity of epithets such as "libtard" and "traitor" for supporters of left-wing causes on social media. Rose, "Decoding the Language," notes the basic concept underlying "cuck" but neglects (or willfully ignores) the cruder subtexts: a cuckold is a man who is not only the victim of infidelity but actually permits and celebrates his wife's sexual preference for another man, especially a black (or Hispanic, or Muslim) man, and even supports the offspring of this infidelity as his own child. The nexus of political,

social, and racial anxieties embedded in this image is complex, but it fundamentally plays upon the liberal's supposed attentiveness to racial justice, support for immigration, promotion of political correctness, "appeasement" of radical Islam, and so forth, all of which directly enable the literal or metaphorical penetration of his wife(/country)—and exploitation of himself— by dark foreigners.

26. In a trenchant essay published not long after the Orlando shootings, Ali Olomi notes that both the ideology of ISIS and that of the Trump campaign rest upon a rhetoric of "toxic masculinity"; both capitalize on a sense not only of disenfranchisement but also emasculation among their followers, caused by different but analogous economic, social, and political problems: "Orlando Shooting and the Tangled History of Jihad and Homosexuality," *Religion Dispatches*, June 21, 2016 (<https://religiondispatches.org/orlando-tragedy-and-the-tangled-history-of-jihad-and-homosexuality/>).

27. Trump made this comment at a rally on August 1, 2016. At the Republican National Convention a few weeks earlier, former candidate for the Republican nomination Ben Carson identified Clinton's mentor, Saul Alinsky, as Lucifer.

28. Trump had previously linked Obama and ISIS in his speeches, but it was his insistent assertion that Obama was the founder of ISIS and Clinton the co-founder at a rally in North Carolina on August 10, 2016 that attracted widespread media attention.

29. Jack Jenkins, "Trumps' Top Pastor Delivers What May Be the Most Partisan Prayer in Convention History," *ThinkProgress.org*, July 19, 2016 (<https://archive.thinkprogress.org/trumps-top-pastor-delivers-what-may-be-the-most-partisan-prayer-in-convention-history-6dbfab3552dc/>). Already in April conservative Christian elements were describing Trump as divinely chosen and anointed: see Brian Tashman, "Self-Proclaimed Prophet: God Will Make Donald Trump President and Kill His Enemies," *Right Wing Watch*, April 20, 2016 (<https://www.rightwingwatch.org/post/self-proclaimed-prophet-god-will-make-donald-trump-president-and-kill-his-enemies/>).

30. See the discussion of the *mubāhalah* to which ISIS leaders summoned the leadership of Jabhat al-Nuṣrah in my contribution to this issue.

31. Reuven Firestone, *Holy War in Judaism: The Fall and Rise of a Controversial Idea* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012).

32. For a recent account of militant Zionist agitation against the British Mandate that does not shy from an unequivocal use of the language of “Jewish terrorism,” see Bruce Hoffman, *Anonymous Soldiers: The Struggle for Israel, 1917–1947* (New York: Knopf, 2015).

33. See Gadi Taub, *The Settlers and the Struggle over the Meaning of Zionism* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2010), 37–64; I owe this reference to Elliot Ratzman.

34. See Geoffrey Claussen, “Pinḥas, the Quest for Purity, and the Dangers of *Tikkun Olam*,” in David Birnbaum and Martin S. Cohen (eds.), *Tikkun Olam: Judaism, Humanism and Transcendence* (New York: New Paradigm Matrix Publishing, 2015), 475–501. I thank Prof. Claussen for providing me with a pre-publication copy of his article. Ginsburgh’s exegesis of the Pinḥas story is perhaps not so exceptional; it is the radical politics to which he applies it that is unusual. Ginsburgh has achieved worldwide notoriety for his blunt statements about the superiority of Jews to other people, even putting this in starkly biological terms, stating that Jewish blood and DNA are inherently worth more than those of gentiles, or that the Torah at least hypothetically authorizes the harvesting of organs from gentiles to save Jews.

35. For a recent discussion comparing the roots of religious Zionist and Christian Identity violence that specifically addresses the differences between the movements in terms of relative political impact in Israel and the United States, see Arie Perliger, “Comparative Framework for Understanding Jewish and Christian Violent Fundamentalism,” *Religions* 6 (2015): 1033–1047.

36. Ironically, in classical Islam the self-sacrificing ethos of volunteer jihadists—many of whom were enthusiastic pietists of an almost monastic type—was apparently appropriated from neighboring Chris-



tians; see Thomas Sizgorich, “Sanctified Violence: Monotheist Militancy as the Tie That Bound Christian Rome and Islam,” *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 77 (2009): 895–921. The activity of these volunteers was often in direct conflict with the attempt of caliphal authorities to professionalize jihad and thus establish an institutional monopoly on violence on the borderlands of Islamic territory, especially those with Byzantium; see Deborah Tor, “Privatized Jihad and Public Order in the Pre-Saljuq Period: The Role of the *Mutatawwi‘a*,” *Iranian Studies* 38 (2005): 555–573. Notably, at the time of their ascendance in the global jihadist movement in the 9/11 era, Al-Qa’idah’s rhetorical appeal to recruits strongly emphasized the necessity of defending Muslims from what was represented as a worldwide ‘Crusader-Zionist’ conspiracy to destroy Islam. In contrast, ISIS propaganda represents the establishment of the caliphate as a long-awaited reversal of decline, with a particular implicit appeal to Muslims in Western societies who are often the victims of discrimination, poverty, and social marginalization—less a defensive jihad than a campaign of self-actualization and material improvement. On the specific appeal to alienated and disenfranchised Muslims in the West, see Jessica Stern, “What Does ISIS Really Want Now?,” *Lawfare*, November 28, 2015 (<https://www.lawfareblog.com/what-does-isis-really-want-now>).

37. Sporadic coverage about the American Christian jihadists operating in the theater of war in northern Iraq first appeared in spring 2015 in various newspapers in the Middle East, in both Arabic and English-language editions, and then spread to Western media outlets: see, e.g., Isabel Coles, “Westerners Join Iraqi Christian Militia to Fight Islamic State,” *Reuters*, February 15, 2015 (<https://uk.reuters.com/article/uk-mideast-crisis-iraq-foreignfighters-idUKKBN0LJ0NB20150215>). More detailed reportage from major media outlets began to appear later, e.g., Jen Percy, “At War in the Garden of Eden,” *New Republic*, August 10, 2015 (<https://newrepublic.com/article/122439/war-garden-eden>); *ibid.*, “Meet the American Vigilantes Who Are Fighting ISIS,” *New York Times*, September 30, 2015; Roc Morin, “The Western Volunteers Fighting ISIS,” *The Atlantic*, January 29, 2016. Some of this coverage has been as unfortunately

hyperbolic as treatments of Western Muslims joining ISIS, e.g., Florian Neuhof, “Anti-ISIS Foreign Legion: Ex-Skinheads and Angry White Men Swell Ranks of Christian Militia Fighting Islamic State,” *International Business Times*, July 13, 2015 (<https://www.ibtimes.co.uk/anti-isis-foreign-legion-ex-skinheads-angry-white-men-swell-ranks-christian-militia-fighting-1510550>).



# Redeeming Slavery: The 'Islamic State' and the Quest for Islamic Morality

Kecia Ali

## *Abstract*

Engaging texts produced by the so-called Islamic State and some of its Muslim opponents, particularly as they treat the enslavement and sexual use/abuse of female captives, this essay argues for a nuanced account of how actors invoke and claim tradition. The Islamic State's capture, sale, and rape of Yazidi women and girls have garnered media attention. It has also generated attempts by IS to justify their deeds as religiously legitimate—not just permissible but actively good—a triumphalist reflection of the Islamic State's authority, its enactment of a continuous Muslim legal tradition, and a proving ground for the moral improvement of its adherents. I assess the disparate ways IS presents enslavement in its English-language propaganda and its Arabic legal manuals and compare its appeals to authority and precedent with those of its Muslim opponents. Muslims confronted with IS's actions and proclamations engage in disaffirmation, distancing, and denial, ranging from the rejection of IS's claim to be Islamic to more sophisticated attempts to rebut its interpretation of sacred sources and historical precedent. Both IS and its Muslim opponents propose historically-grounded notions of legitimacy that affirm their actions as properly Islamic to a variety of audiences, Muslim and non-Muslim.

## Introduction

In February 2015, journalist Graeme Wood caused a stir with “What ISIS Really Wants,” published in *The Atlantic*.<sup>1</sup> Wood’s article focuses on the Islamic State’s apocalyptic religious vision, since analyzed more fully by Will McCants.<sup>2</sup> Among other things, Wood asserts that the group is, as Bernard Haykel puts it, “smack in the middle of the medieval tradition,” which includes things that shock and repulse observers, Muslim and non-Muslim alike—including, it seems, savage violence and slavery.<sup>3</sup> Its deployment of brutality, especially its capture, enslavement, sale, and rape of women from Iraq’s Yazidi minority, are among the issues mentioned when the question is asked: Is the Islamic State in fact Islamic?

Though Wood grants that most Muslims do not support IS, and acknowledges the role of interpretation in formulating its doctrines, the overall impression conveyed by the article is that Muslims who deny that IS fairly represents Islam are either apologists or simply do not *really* know anything about Islam. The article quickly attracted rebuttals.<sup>4</sup> More than one commentator has pointed out that treating IS as a legitimate representative of the Islamic tradition, as seriously religious and dedicated to the texts “shared by all Sunni Muslims,” bolsters the group’s agenda.<sup>5</sup>

Wood was right that IS lays claim to the tradition, citing canonical texts, yet it also seems a stretch to insist, as Haykel contends, that “these guys have just as much legitimacy as anyone else.”<sup>6</sup> Religious studies scholars are not tasked with judging which groups are “Islamic” or “un-Islamic.”<sup>7</sup> Rather, the job is to analyze how various actors make claims to represent, understand, or further their tradition.<sup>8</sup> One can do so while still making distinctions between various religious actors and situating religious claims in an historical and social framework.

In her classic 1986 essay “Tradition as a Modality of Change: Islamic Examples,” Marilyn Waldman argues that in Muslim societies, appeals to tradition do not serve to maintain the status quo but rather to promote change by appealing to the perceived authoritativeness of some past practice or precedent.<sup>9</sup> More recently, Zareena Grewal defines tradition

as “a process of debate over what links past, present, and future in a continuity that is meaningful and authoritative.” Rather than “understanding ... tradition as a discrete body of ideas and practices [preserved] from the past [that] survive into the present and persist into the future,” she advocates closer scrutiny of “how tradition moves over time ... as a mediation process that is reflexive and selective.” In this process, “Custodians,” sometimes self-appointed, “decide which elements should be emphasized, highlighted, even added in order to ensure the tradition’s survival in the future.”<sup>10</sup> Both IS and its detractors claim custodianship of the tradition. Without asserting that all are equally close to the norms generally espoused by the bulk of Muslim thinkers and believers over the centuries, scholars of religion must attend to the elements emphasized, highlighted, added, and—I would argue—subtracted in contemporary contestations of Islam. Slavery serves as a useful test case to assess arguments over tradition.

### *Violence, victimization, and media attention*

This essay addresses religio-legal interpretation, but any discussion of violence and its justifications must address the real violence inflicted on real people in real places. Whose victimization merits attention has, deservedly, been a major theme discussed in the United States and elsewhere in the last year, as the media treats deaths at the hands of terrorists, so-called lone-wolf shooters, police officers, and military forces very differently. What forms do narratives of violence take? When is violence terror, an inevitable outgrowth of a violent tradition, and when is it mundane and individual? When is it nearly invisible? Whose suffering merits notice? Whose lives matter?

United States drones terrorize swathes of Arab and Asian lands but seek to fly under the radar of American public opinion. IS has deliberately courted media attention with its spectacular brutalities. Barely known before 2014, IS now dominates headlines disproportionate to the territory it controls and the body count it racks up.<sup>11</sup> As Jessica Stern and J. M. Berger write, “To simply highlight ISIS’s barbarity is inadequate to under-

cut its messaging goals; in many cases, it accomplishes them.” They highlight the way beheading creates fear: “In the Western world, in the twenty-first century, the idea of a beheading was something unreal, archaic, a vaguely understood and little-contemplated relic of a distant past.”<sup>12</sup> Slavery is not nearly so distant temporally from beheadings, but it also has the feel of something archaic, primitive, and horrible, especially when it merges violence and sex.

Mass media transforms some information into signal while other information remains simply noise.<sup>13</sup> Women’s suffering in wartime is typically noise, not perceived as a form of terrorism—not even necessarily as news—but as a ‘women’s issue.’<sup>14</sup> The deplorable capture, rape, and sale of Yazidi women, which came to the fore of the news cycle in summer 2014, like the previous spring’s kidnapping of hundreds of girls by Nigerian separatists Boko Haram, amplified the signal of Muslim fanaticism. No Orientalist trope is as powerful as that of the oppression of Muslim women or the oppression of women by Muslims.<sup>15</sup> Sex and violence make an irresistible combination. Accounts of enslaved Yazidi women and girls presented in journalist Rukmini Callimachi’s *New York Times* article exploring IS’s “theology of rape” fit into a familiar narrative of Muslim barbarism.<sup>16</sup> So too Callimachi’s exposé of the systematic, coercive use of contraception and abortion by Islamic State soldiers to make possible the ready transfer and continual sexual availability of their captives, which refers to the “medieval codes” on which IS draws to justify its practices.<sup>17</sup>

Such accounts, both true and terrible, do political work. As Irvin Schick pointed out nearly two decades ago, “political capital continues to be made of the sufferings, whether systematic or isolated, of non-European women.” Though he advocates “neither indifference, nor abject relativism,” he insists that one must “bear in mind the geopolitical matrix within which these images of victimized oriental women circulate.”<sup>18</sup> Lila Abu-Lughod’s *Do Muslim Women Need Saving?* illuminates the white savior complex that frames much reporting on and humanitarian intervention in lands where Muslims live; she illustrates the ways in which

women's suffering has been coopted and repurposed to justify imperialist warfare.<sup>19</sup>

In some respects, the capture and rape of Yazidi women are ordinary actions. Sexual violence against women in wartime is epidemic. Muslim troops are by no means unique in violating women and girls. Rape has been used systematically as a weapon of war in Bosnia, Rwanda, and Colombia and, reaching back further into the twentieth century, in China by Japanese soldiers and in Bangladesh by Pakistani soldiers. Muslim women were systematically raped in Bosnia and Bangladesh, by non-Muslims in one case and Muslims in the other.<sup>20</sup> U.N. peacekeeping forces have been implicated in patterns of sexual assault.<sup>21</sup> American soldiers have been guilty of the same around the globe, and within military ranks. Beyond occasional rogue soldiers who rape, U.S. military and intelligence services have routinely used sexualized torture and humiliation.<sup>22</sup>

If sexual violence is all too common in conflict zones, leaving aside the deplorable forms it takes in what we might call ordinary life, why emphasize the criminal behavior of Muslim insurgencies? Why not treat the systematic capture and sale of Yazidi women and girls as a form of sex trafficking or wartime rape? By using the term slavery, does one confer legitimacy on IS claims to be following Islamic law? Is taking seriously IS propaganda—even attempts to refute it from within Islam—a concession that Muslim behavior can be explained through religious doctrine? My aim is not to grant IS propaganda status as a legitimate or full explanation of its actions or motives. Rather, it is to understand a series of attempts at tradition-making, taking slavery as a case study.

The Islamic State has attempted to justify the capture, enslavement, and sale of women and girls as religiously meritorious: not just acceptable but a positive good. Rather than grudgingly grant its permissibility, or merely matter-of-factly assume its legality as most premodern texts do, IS proclaims enslavement a triumphalist reflection of its own legitimacy. Muslims confronted with IS's actions and proclamations engage in a ritualized dance of disaffirmation, of distancing, of rejection and denial. The ways they do so range from the commonsensical, if naïve and reli-



giously problematic, rejection of IS' claim to be Islamic—in other words, *takfir* (the act of one Muslim asserting that another Muslim, on the basis of beliefs or actions, is actually not a Muslim but rather an infidel or *kāfir*)—to more sophisticated attempts to rebut its interpretation of sacred sources and historical precedent.<sup>23</sup> The quest for both IS and its Muslim opponents alike is to frame a notion of authority that legitimates their actions to a variety of audiences, Muslim and non-Muslim.

*Interlude: Chattel slavery, sex slavery, and the Orientalist imagination*

For most Americans, the term slavery evokes racialized chattel slavery as practiced on Southern plantations, in the field and the master's house. This is a limited and partial view of the range and scope of American slavery, which extended beyond the South, beyond the cotton field, into workshops and trade, and involved considerable sexual and other types of violence. Muslim practices of capture, enslavement, and slaveholding were even more diverse across the geographical and chronological breadth of Muslim civilization. Slavery in court-linked households in Mughal-ruled India and the Mamluk and Ottoman Empires differed from domestic and trade-based slavery in Sub-Saharan Africa.<sup>24</sup> Captivity with the usual aim of ransom by Barbary corsairs was different still.<sup>25</sup>

For quite some time, the idea prevailed (including in writings by sympathetic non-Muslims) that Islamic slavery was mild while American slavery was harsh.<sup>26</sup> In fact, some forms and practices of slavery among Muslims or by Muslims could be equally harsh. Laws might be closely followed or not.<sup>27</sup> Practices could be harsher than rules or not. Legal discussions having to do with slavery might be grounded in concrete circumstances of enslavement or not. One may generalize, however, to note that the purchase of female slaves for sex as well as domestic service was an enduring aspect of slave markets.<sup>28</sup> The form of slavery IS is interested in reviving, the enslavement and sexual use of females captured from enemies, has the most purchase on the Western imagination, envisioning women imprisoned and used for sex: a somewhat more brutal instantiation of the harem. If one accepts that IS' tactics are chosen in

part for the reaction they aim to provoke, media reaction to enslavement would seem to justify it. Additionally, the availability of sex, whether with captive women or through marriages arranged by a marriage bureau, serves as an incentive for recruiting fighters.<sup>29</sup>

*Tradition and moderation: The “Open Letter to Al-Baghdadi”*

A handful of documents by IS and its detractors published in late 2014 and early 2015 present competing conceptions of authority, precedent, and history: two manuals and two articles from the Islamic State and a coauthored “Open Letter” to the leader, fighters, and followers of IS by a diverse group of self-identified scholars and religious figures, condemning IS’ actions, including enslavement, as incompatible with Islam.<sup>30</sup> These writings present contradictory perspectives on the permissibility and desirability of slavery in the contemporary world, and reveal a great deal about how diverse actors deploy history and understand the concepts of the permissible and the forbidden.

The contours of the Islamic State’s two main approaches to justifying slavery can be better understood through a brief exploration of one outside attempt to rebut its legitimacy and views. The “Open Letter to Al-Baghdadi” was presented at a press conference and published online in September 2014, after the media’s attention in summer 2014 to the enslavement of Yazidi women and girls. The Council on American-Islamic Relations took the lead on its release, in conjunction with the Fiqh Council of North America.<sup>31</sup> The letter foregrounds the issue of legitimate authority. Its 126 (male) signatories are global, including scholars and religious figures from Uzbekistan, the Sudan, Iceland, and the United States. Its modes of presentation and argumentation are slick and geared toward media accessibility, though the mainstream media did not pay much attention to it.<sup>32</sup> Its English-only executive summary begins: “It is forbidden in Islam to issue fatwas without all the necessary learning requirements”; moreover, “It is forbidden in Islam to ignore the reality of contemporary times when deriving legal rulings.”<sup>33</sup> Although “It is permissible in Islam [for scholars] to differ on any matter, except those

fundamentals of religion that all Muslims must know,” the list focuses on the forbidden. Of the twenty-four points of the “executive summary,” more than three quarters (nineteen) declare something to be forbidden in Islam.<sup>34</sup>

Among the acts and beliefs it declares forbidden is contemporary enslavement. The summary declares: “The re-introduction of slavery is forbidden in Islam. It was abolished by universal consensus.” The body of the letter, which runs to twenty-three pages, goes on to make a more detailed two-paragraph argument as to why slavery is forbidden today.<sup>35</sup> It posits a trajectory of social progress that encompasses all of humanity, while insisting that Muslims may legitimately claim its basic principles as part of their essential belief structure: “No scholar of Islam disputes that one of Islam’s aims is to abolish slavery.” This claim is both absurd and ahistorical, or perhaps absurd because it is so blatantly ahistorical.<sup>36</sup> Certainly, one may posit within Muslim tradition “an emancipatory ethic”—a consistent preference for freeing slaves and a reluctance to enslave (so a foundling, for instance, could not be taken as a slave).<sup>37</sup> Muslim theologians have been uncomfortable with slavery, just as some were uncomfortable with killing animals. But emancipation is an ameliorative practice, and does not presume abolition; indeed, it accepts that enslavement and slaveholding will continue and thus require regulation. Still, the letter’s claim merits further exploration. It views slavery’s abolition as not only a Muslim victory but one of humanity writ large: “For over a century, Muslims, and indeed the entire world, have been united in the prohibition and criminalization of slavery, which was a milestone in human history when it was finally achieved.”<sup>38</sup>

Despite this reference to all of humanity, the letter’s main focus is Islam. It argues that there was “a century of Muslim consensus on the prohibition of slavery” which IS has now violated by taking “women as concubines.”<sup>39</sup> They have also broken covenants since “all the Muslim countries in the world are signatories of anti-slavery conventions.” They cite Q Isrā’ 17:34 to insist that Muslims must uphold their covenants; therefore, Muslims must not reintroduce slavery. The section concludes by insisting that “You [al-Baghdādī] bear the responsibility of this great

crime and all the reactions which this may lead to against all Muslims.” The “Open Letter” appeals not to truth or falsehood but to a desire to preserve Muslim life, well-being, and reputation from the depredations of unspecified actors.

### *Islamic State propaganda: Dabiq*

One may read the fourth issue of *Dabiq*, IS’ online English-language propaganda magazine, which was published the following month, as a response to this “Open Letter.” An article entitled “The Revival of Slavery Before the Hour” treats the “abandonment of slavery” as part of the “abandonment of Sharī’ah law” and “the rise of tāghūt law” which also involved “the desertion of jihād.”<sup>40</sup> Imagining Muslim history through a reductive, distorted lens, IS deems the “revival” of this authentic early practice as a sign of its own efficacy and legitimacy. It frames enslavement as part of a campaign against Western enemies as well as against neutered Muslims who have abandoned the practice of slaveholding. Muslims’ fall from glory coincided with the abandonment of slavery; the revival of slavery has practical, symbolic, and apocalyptic significance. It will, according to *Dabiq*, save Muslims from sexual sin: “the desertion of slavery” has resulted in an increase in sexual misconduct “because the shar’ī alternative to marriage is not available.” Additionally, “prohibited khalwah [or] (seclusion)” leads to illicit sex “between the man and the maid, whereas if she were his concubine, the marriage would be legal. This again is from the consequences of abandoning jihād and chasing after the dunyā.”<sup>41</sup>

Beyond the practical rationale for reviving slavery, it signifies IS’ resumption of jihad, and its success in that realm. It touts “this large-scale enslavement of mushrik families [as] probably the first since the abandonment of this Sharī’ah law”—though it acknowledges the “much smaller” example of “the enslavement of Christian women and children in the Philippines and Nigeria by the mujāhidīn there.”<sup>42</sup> It prevents sexual sin (the major concern of an article in a later issue, “Slave-Girls or Prostitutes?”, published under a female pseudonym<sup>43</sup>), affirms IS’

power and prowess, and carries apocalyptic weight. A convoluted interpretation of a prophecy about the End Times attributed to Muḥammad mentions slavery and seems thus to require the existence of slavery as both foreshadowing and helping bring about the Last Judgment (“the Hour”). The *Dabiq* article declares it “interesting to note that slavery has been mentioned as one of the signs of the Hour as well as one of the causes behind al-Malhamah al-Kubrā,”<sup>44</sup> the great battle between believers and “Rome”—now understood as Westerners, including Americans—that presages the End Times.<sup>45</sup>

IS embraces the familiar revivalist model of a pristine early period followed by decline. It presents its version of Islamic morality as indisputable, describing Muslims who disagree as “weak-minded and weak hearted.” While the “Open Letter” describes slavery as “something the Shariah worked tirelessly to undo,” *Dabiq* describes “enslaving the families of the kuffār and taking their women as concubines” as “a firmly established aspect of the Sharī’ah that if one were to deny or mock, he would be denying or mocking the verses of the Qur’ān and the narrations of the Prophet (sallallāhu ‘alayhi wa sallam), and thereby apostatizing from Islam.” ‘Umm Sumayyah al-Muhajirah,’ author of the aforementioned *Dabiq* article “Slave-Girls or Prostitutes?,” scorns Muslim “quasi men” who live among non-Muslims, accept human rights norms, and consider “taking a slave-girl as a concubine” to be rape.<sup>46</sup>

In her study of American Muslim knowledge seekers, Grewal notes that “the reformist narrative of rupture depicts tradition in the recent past as a moral departure or degeneration from its own beginnings; they define their authority in the present as a recurrence, but not a continuation, of the raw potential of Islam’s foundation.”<sup>47</sup> Both *Dabiq* and the “Open Letter” acknowledge discontinuity in the practice of slavery. In the case of *Dabiq*, their revival of slavery attempts to actualize that “raw potential.” The “Open Letter,” by contrast, posits a moral trajectory in which the essential seed of abolition planted has now borne fruit: the present stands as culmination of a continuous tradition, in which it is the “raw potential” for abolition that has finally been actualized.

*Islamic State jurisprudence: The Research and Fatwa Department*

In contrast to *Dabiq*'s articles, which acknowledge disagreement between contemporary Muslims over the permissibility of slavery and which emphasize the contemporary resurrection of an abandoned practice, Arabic legal publications by the Islamic State acknowledge no discontinuity in the practice of enslavement and slave concubinage, nor disagreement about their basic permissibility. Whereas *Dabiq*'s propaganda emphasizes revival and chastises weak Muslim opponents, IS' Research and Fatwa Department echoes the "Open Letter" in its publications by pretending a seamless continuity with the religious-scholarly tradition of the past, even as its texts make clear just how distant and unfamiliar that past is.

One of these Arabic documents was released online in late 2014. A five-page pamphlet entitled "Questions and Answers on Captives and Slaves" lists as its publisher "the Islamic State Research and Fatwa Department."<sup>48</sup> A longer manual entitled "The Captive (*sabi*): Rulings and Questions" was published earlier in 2014.<sup>49</sup> It situates practical rules within a more fleshed-out legal and theological frame. Both texts, in different ways, provide straightforward guidance for ugly practices; presume their audience's unfamiliarity with basic elements of jurisprudence governing enslavement; and juxtapose advocacy of the enslavement of unbelievers and acceptance of the rape of children with theological reflection on the potential injustice of slavery, the merit to be gained by recognizing the humanity of enslaved people, and the deep moral weight of ownership. Here, Stern and Berger's remark on IS' "strange but potent new blend of utopianism and appalling carnage" is apt.<sup>50</sup>

"Questions and Answers" contains thirty-two catechistic questions. It affirms the permissibility of men "having sex with slaves who have not reached puberty," specifying, as classical texts do when they discuss sex with minors, that the slaves must be "fit for sex"; otherwise they may be enjoyed without intercourse.<sup>51</sup> They may be beaten to correct a fault. They can be bought, sold, and given. They are property.

The very basic nature of some of the questions answered suggests the deep unfamiliarity of the institution of slavery to its target audience. It asks, “What is a ‘*sabī*?’” It asks, “If a female slave is married, does her husband or her master have the right to have sex with her?” Although the pretense of the Q&A is that this is an institution for which texts and scholarship provide all the answers, the inclusion of such basic material makes clear that its audience has no idea about things that were taken for granted in the premodern legal tradition. This presumably reflects both the unfamiliarity of slavery to several generations of Middle Easterners *and* the fact that the audience for the pamphlet is comprised of laypeople with no legal training. Premodern legal texts generally proceed casuistically, stating a complicated case and then addressing the various issues that arise from such permutations. Basic rules are typically presumed rather than stated directly. Here, however, the practical and not jurisprudential import of the queries and responses is clear.

“The Captive,” too, begins by dissecting the terms *sabī* and *sabāyā*. It then segues into a lengthy set of anecdotes about the Prophet Muḥammad and some of his Companions. These serve not merely to illustrate particular precedents but to paint a portrait of a society in which enslavement of captives and the sexual use of female slaves was part of the status quo. The examples it includes, taken from *ḥadīth* compilations and other early texts, record specific instances of behavior in order to weigh in on whether, for instance, one might practice withdrawal with a female captive in order to attempt to prevent pregnancy. In this new context, the anecdotes portray enslavement as a central practice of the pious forbears (*salaf*) who constitute the movement’s central exemplars.

Although the manual takes pains to show that Muḥammad and other Companions owned slaves, including those taken in battle, slaveholding nonetheless poses potent problems. If all are slaves of God, how can some people own others? This theological conundrum is answered with an appeal to God’s actions: it is God who has “placed your brothers under your hands.” Potential unease is further assuaged by owners’ obligations of good treatment: they are to feed and clothe these enslaved

“brothers” from what they themselves feed and clothe themselves, and not to impose work on them that they cannot bear.<sup>52</sup>

Despite the assumption that its audience will be unaware of the legal treatment of matters involving slaves, the short pamphlet and longer manual present themselves as part of a continuous scholarly tradition, evoked through the use of terms such as “consensus” (*ijmāʿ*) and “disagreement” (*ikhtilāf*). Their doctrines are generally consonant with the classical tradition. Yet their mode of presenting these rules inadvertently attests to their strangeness in this vastly changed context. When the pamphlet insists, “There is no disagreement among the ‘ulama about the permissibility of [taking] disbelieving concubines,” it affirms a classical doctrine. At the same time, its pointed focus on something that would once have been too obvious to bother mentioning points to the need to relegitimize basic elements of a defunct worldview. The pamphlet also invokes scholarly consensus in a later entry, about whether a slave manumitted as expiation of a sin other than inadvertent killing must be a Muslim. The pamphlet alludes to specific substantive disagreements between scholars as part of its discussion, sometimes identifying its views as the “majority” or “stronger” position. The longer manual does more with these differences, signaling dispute on a number of questions between adherents of different schools before siding with one or the other group, often through an opinion of the fourteenth-century scholar Ibn Qayyim al-Jawziyyah. By contrast, the “Open Letter” insists on the permissibility of scholarly disagreement but gives few examples; it prefers the generalized grand declaration of absolutes.

Assumptions operative in some of the pamphlet’s questions and answers are telling. Unbelief is the criterion for legitimately taking captives, but some queries presume that slaves will convert and practice Muslim rituals. For instance, it explains what female slaves must cover in prayer. More broadly, some material imagines the integration of female slaves into households, families, and community. One query asks whether a female slave has a right to a portion of her master’s time, as each wife in a polygynous marriage would. The answer—though she does not have



a right to a share, her owner must enable her to keep chaste, so he must have sex with her himself, marry her off, or sell her to another owner who can provide for her—is of a piece with the longer manual’s concern for the appropriate feeding and clothing of slaves. These documents disconcertingly juxtapose the stark and sometimes brutal claims of owners over slaves’ bodies with pious concern for the enslaved people’s human needs for food, clothing, and sex.

These recognitions of the common humanity of slave owners and enslaved people are largely absent from the partial translation of the pamphlet published by the Middle East Media Research Institute (MEMRI).<sup>53</sup> Though MEMRI has been criticized for presenting a biased picture of contemporary Muslim and Middle Eastern perspectives by, for instance, cherry-picking unrepresentative texts, its translations are generally accurate. MEMRI’s version of “Questions and Answers” includes twenty-five of the original thirty-two entries. A closely attentive reader may notice that the numbers jump from 22 to 24 and 25 to 27, but entries 28–32, the final entries, are omitted without any indication that they have been removed other than the brief prefatory note that the translation is of “excerpts from the pamphlet.”

MEMRI’s introductory blurb combines dispassionate recitation of facts with a selective highlighting of salient details:

The Research and Fatwa Department of the Islamic State (ISIS) has released a pamphlet on the topic of female captives and slaves. The pamphlet, which is dated Muharram 1436 (October/November 2014) and was printed by ISIS’s publishing house, Al-Himma Library, is titled *Su’al wa-Jawab fi al-Sabi wa-Riqab* (“Questions and Answers on Taking Captives and Slaves”). It was presumably released in response to the uproar caused by the many reports this summer that ISIS had taken Yazidi girls and women as sex slaves. Written in the form of questions and answers, it clarifies the position of Islamic law (as ISIS interprets it) on various relevant issues, and states,

among other things, that it is permissible to have sexual intercourse with non-Muslim slaves, including young girls, and that it is also permitted to beat them and trade in them.<sup>54</sup>

Like the *New York Times* articles on the rape of Yazidi captives, the MEMRI translation focuses the readers' attention on two points: "it is permissible to have sexual intercourse with non-Muslim slaves, including young girls, and ... it is permitted to beat them and trade in them." The slavery discussed here is sexualized, embodied, and female. These notes of sex, violence, and money were echoed in mainstream media accounts with titles like "Sex Slavery Manual." Unsurprisingly, given its focus on violence toward slaves, MEMRI omits the query about the slave's sexual satisfaction and ends on a partial translation of the query about the reward for freeing a female slave. This attention to manumission, which is explained as protecting believers from the torments of Hell, seems at odds with the other content included but aids in portraying Muslims as violent by emphasizing their preoccupation with "hellfire." The translation leaves out the immediately preceding query, a terse question about whether a female slave can buy herself from her owner. (Answer: "Yes, it is permissible and this transaction is called 'al-mukataba.'") More saliently, MEMRI's version leaves off the final five entries, which discuss freeing slaves in order to expiate misdeeds or fulfill oaths. Through this omission, MEMRI retains the focus on having sex with, beating, or selling women and girls, and bypasses the pious preoccupation with gaining reward through the act of freeing a believing slave. This concern with religious merit in treating slaves well and freeing them where appropriate in no way mitigates, and may even highlight, the horror of IS' basic positions on capture and enslavement. The MEMRI translation's omission of the discussion of manumission, however, leaves readers further from understanding how IS makes its appeals to tradition.

*Conclusion: Tradition-making*

It is irresponsible to ignore political, economic, and military factors that have contributed to creating and nurturing both the ideology and the actions of IS and other violent extremist groups. Yet to suggest that religion is merely a veneer is also unsatisfactory. Attempting to situate IS and its practices on a spectrum from most to least Islamic is likewise futile. What is necessary is nuanced attention to processes of tradition-making. The Islamic/un-Islamic dichotomy assumes a static definition of Islam. Often, this definition assumes a tradition that simply emerges from a body of texts. Practices consonant with the texts—or that are interpreted as being so—are therefore Islamic. (The actual practices and politics of interpretation remain obscure.) Muslims who say otherwise, as the overwhelming majority do when confronted with IS or the idea of contemporary slavery, are insufficiently educated or fooling themselves.

If one acknowledges the obvious—Muslim tradition is contested—questions remain about how best to conceptualize divergences. I have argued that one must attend to notions of history as well as authority. IS and the scholar-signatories of the letter to Baghdādī agree that early Muslims held slaves. They deem different aspects of their practice exemplary—in *Dabiq*, taking, owning, and reproducing through slaves; in the “Open Letter,” freeing them. The letter quotes Qur’ānic passages on the freeing of slaves (Q Balad 90:12–14 and Mujādilah 58:3) and declares “The Prophet Muhammad’s *Sunnah* is that he freed all male and female slaves who were in his possession or whom [sic] had been given to him.”<sup>55</sup> Yet it is not as simple as IS = retrograde = focus on enslavement; non-extremist scholars = respect for the present context = focus on manumission. Both the taking of slaves and the freeing of them come to the fore in “Questions and Answers,” which quotes the Qur’ān and gives examples regarding the freeing of slaves in cases of specific transgressions.

Different ideas of history inform these documents. Both *Dabiq* and the “Open Letter” acknowledge that the practice of slavery has histor-

ically been discontinuous. They disagree about the meaning of its resurgence. IS congratulates itself on “The Revival of Slavery Before the Hour” —a sign that Muslims are taking up an abandoned, righteous practice. The “Open Letter,” by contrast, deems forbidden the “reintroduction of slavery” after it was abolished by consensus. Interestingly, these texts combine different notions of history with similarly timeless notions of shari’ah. Followers of idolatrous laws abandoned shari’ah and hence abandoned slavery, according to IS. For the letter’s signatories, the shari’ah sought the abolition of slavery from the start; it merely took a while for it to fully materialize, but when it did, it was final. It goes without saying that for both, shari’ah determines legitimacy. Rules may change, and the letter insists that one must take contemporary circumstances into account, but its signatories take it as axiomatic that if a practice is to be forbidden today, the seeds of that prohibition must have been sown already in its earliest moments. In contrast to both of these documents, the Q&A pamphlet and “The Captive” presume a timeless, seamless notion of history in which the taking, selling, and owning of slaves is simply part of the status quo.<sup>56</sup> In this way, it more effectively erases the contested nature of this practice, even as it inadvertently attests to how unfamiliar slaveholding is for its audience.

Asking new questions of these documents can help present a fuller picture of what is at stake. One might ask, for instance, about gendered authority. Beyond the presumptions about gender, sexuality, and ownership in the rules about enslavement and slaveholding adapted from classical Muslim jurisprudence, there are questions about gendered authority in contemporary situations. In the IS legal documents, in the “Open Letter” as originally released, and indeed in Wood’s article in *The Atlantic*, women are absent as authorities: the scholars, whether religious authorities or Western secular academics, are all male. Girls and women appear instead as objects of enslavement or of rescue. Women’s agency only appears in two minor forms. One is the *Dabiq* article ascribed to a woman emigrant (‘Umm Sumayyah al-Muhajirah’), which, among other claims, criticizes Muslim men who reject enslavement. The other ack-

nowledgment of women's agency comes from the brief references in *Dabiq* articles and IS legal texts to the possibilities that enslaved women might convert, as well as the legal texts' acknowledgment that they might run away, commit punishable offenses, or buy themselves from their masters.

Both IS and its opponents draw on Muslim history, scripture, and interpretive texts and communities as they claim legitimacy for their version of Muslim tradition. Slavery as contested presents a useful lens through which to view this tradition-in-the-making. Debates over slavery are global, happening online even as real bodies suffer tragically in real places. Redeeming slaves is one issue, but it pales beside the larger concern of IS and its opponents with redeeming Islam. It remains to be seen what form that redemption will take.

## Notes

All digital content cited in this article was last accessed via the URLs provided in the notes below on October 29, 2020.

1. Graeme Wood, "What ISIS Really Wants," *The Atlantic*, March 2015.
2. William McCants, *The ISIS Apocalypse: The History, Strategy, and Domsday Vision of the Islamic State* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2015).
3. Wood, "What ISIS Really Wants."
4. One example: Jack Jenkins, "What The Atlantic Gets Dangerously Wrong About ISIS and Islam," *ThinkProgress.org*, February 18, 2015 (<https://archive.thinkprogress.org/what-the-atlantic-gets-dangerously-wrong-about-isis-and-islam-820a18946e97/>).
5. The quoted phrase is from Bernard Haykel in Wood, "What ISIS Really Wants." Jack Jenkins provides a fuller and substantially more nuanced version of Haykel's comments in "What The Atlantic Left Out about ISIS According to Their Own Expert," *ThinkProgress.org*, February 20, 2015 (<https://archive.thinkprogress.org/what-the-atlantic-left-out-about-isis-according-to-their-own-expert-afd98cf1c134/>).
6. Wood, "What ISIS Really Wants."
7. As for assessing their religiosity, when a released captive reportedly affirmed that his IS captors did not even have a copy of the Qurʾān (as though this were dispositive of the question of religiosity), the media pounced (e.g., "ISIS Captors 'Didn't Have a Quran,' Says Ex-Hostage," *Al Arabiya English*, February 4, 2015 [<https://english.alarabiya.net/en/News/middle-east/2015/02/04/ISIS-captors-didn-t-have-a-Quran-says-former-hostage.html>]). It turns out, however, that the captive was misquoted in the original CNN article, which later corrected his remarks: it was the captives who were not provided with a copy of the Qurʾān; Mick Krever, "ISIS Captors Cared Little About Religion, Says Former Hostage," *CNN.com*, February 4, 2015 ([https://www.cnn.com/2015/02/03/intl\\_world/amanpour-didier-francois/index.html](https://www.cnn.com/2015/02/03/intl_world/amanpour-didier-francois/index.html)).
8. Zareena Grewal pithily diagnoses "the problem with the revivalist movement: everyone is an expert, and the most asinine arguments share

the shelf with real scholarship, and not everyone knows the difference.” Zareena Grewal, *Islam is a Foreign Country* (New York: New York University Press, 2013), 186.

9. Marilyn Waldman, “Tradition as a Modality of Change: Islamic Examples,” *History of Religions* 25 (1986): 318–340.

10. Grewal, *Islam is a Foreign Country*, 200.

11. Rafia Zakaria, “ISIS Wants You to Share This: How the Well-Meaning Public Became a Handmaiden for Terror,” *The Nation*, January 12–19, 2015.

12. Jessica Stern and J.M. Berger, *ISIS: The State of Terror* (New York: Harper Collins, 2015), 251, 2.

13. For one exploration: Arundhati Roy, *War Talk* (Boston: South End Press, 2003).

14. Aki Peritz and Tara Maller, “The Islamic State of Sexual Violence,” *Foreign Policy*, September 16, 2014 (<https://foreignpolicy.com/2014/09/16/the-islamic-state-of-sexual-violence/>).

15. The “Sydney siege” hostage-taker had a documented history of sexualized harassment and violence. He was taken seriously as a threat only when he was treated as a Muslim terrorist. Michelle Innis, “Sydney Hostage Siege Ends with Gunman and 2 Captives Dead as Police Storm Café,” *New York Times*, December 15, 2014.

16. Rukmini Callimachi, “ISIS Enshrines a Theology of Rape,” *New York Times*, August 13, 2015. The *New York Times* later presented information on similar sexual offenses committed by U.S. allies—Afghan men using boys for sex—which American military personnel were told to tolerate. That exposé never suggested religious doctrine as an explanation or justification for the men’s actions. Joseph Goldstein, “U.S. Soldiers Told to Ignore Sexual Abuse of Boys by Afghan Allies,” *New York Times*, September 20, 2015.

17. Rukmini Callimachi, “To Maintain Supply of Sex Slaves, ISIS Pushes Birth Control,” *New York Times*, March 12, 2016.

18. Irvin C. Schick, *The Erotic Margin: Sexuality and Spatiality in Alterist Discourse* (London: Verso Books, 1999), 157.

19. Lila Abu-Lughod, *Do Muslim Women Need Saving?* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2013). Rochelle Terman offers a thoughtful critique of Abu-Lughod, with particular emphasis on honor crimes, in “Islamophobia, Feminism, and the Politics of Critique,” *Theory, Culture & Society* 33 (2016): 77–102.

20. One could also cite the rape and murder of Muslim women during the Gujurat “pogrom” of 2002; see Roy, *War Talk*, 105.

21. For one example: Owen Bowcott, “UN Accused of ‘Gross Failure’ over Alleged Sexual Abuse by French Troops,” *The Guardian*, December 17, 2015 (<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/dec/17/un-gross-failure-sexual-abuse-french-troops-central-african-republic>).

22. The report is available as the U.S. Senate Select Committee on Intelligence “Committee Study of the Central Intelligence Agency’s Detention and Interrogation Program together with Foreword by Chairman Feinstein and Additional and Minority Views,” S. Rpt. 113-228, December 9, 2014 (<http://www.intelligence.senate.gov/publications>). As I was completing revisions to this article, a further discussion of sexualized humiliation appeared: Spencer Ackerman, “CIA Photographed Detainees Naked before Sending them to be Tortured,” *The Guardian*, March 28, 2016 ([https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2016/mar/28/cia-photographed-naked-detainees?CMP=twt\\_gu](https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2016/mar/28/cia-photographed-naked-detainees?CMP=twt_gu)).

23. On various approaches to *takfir*: Erik Pell, a convert to Islam, considers IS members to be apostates; see Nicholas Schmidle, “Lost in Syria,” *New Yorker*, February 16, 2015. In a blog post, amina wadud rejects the temptation to practice *takfir* but signals her perception that IS does not meet even basic criteria for Islam, and so refuses to use the term “Islamic” in discussing them; “Muslim Separatists and The Idea of an ‘Islamic’ State,” *Feminism and Religion*, September 5, 2014 (<https://feminismandreligion.com/2014/09/05/muslim-separatists-and-the-idea-of-an-islamic-state-by-amina-wadud/>). On Sunni reticence about the practice of *takfir*, consult Sherman A. Jackson, *On the Boundaries of Theological Tolerance in Islam: Abū Ḥāmid al-Ghazālī’s Fayṣal al-Tafriqa* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), especially Jackson’s introduction to al-



Ghazālī's text.

24. Indrani Chatterjee, *Gender, Slavery and Law in Colonial India* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002); Humphrey J. Fisher, *Slavery in the History of Muslim Black Africa* (New York: New York University Press, 2001).

25. Nabil Matar, *Britain and Barbary, 1589-1689* (Gainesville, FL: University Press of Florida, 2005). Distinguishing between captivity and slavery in North African sources (114–115), Matar argues that though “greed and economic need” were motivations, so too was “retaliation for the violence committed against them by Europeans—government sponsored acts of empire as well as disparate attacks of pirates and privateers” (113). The racialization of captivity and slavery, with whites/Europeans subject to the former and black Africans to the latter, deserves further attention.

26. Ehud Toledano, *Slavery and Abolition in the Ottoman Middle East* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1997), 122–129, 138–139; Bernard Lewis, *Race and Slavery in the Middle East* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), vi. Recently, in reaction to the slaving activities of the Islamic State, Abdullah bin Hamid Ali expressed a variation of this view, “Islam & the Abolition of Slavery,” *Lamppost Education Initiative*, August 19, 2012 (<https://lamppostedu.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/06/Emancipation-of-Slaves.pdf>).

27. Fisher, *Slavery*, 27. He discusses Muslims' enslavement of other Muslims.

28. To give just one example of the importance of female slaves, consider the relative demand for and prices of various slaves discussed in Fisher, *Slavery*, 325–331. Note that all female slaves except married ones were legally subject to their masters' sexual use, even those not specifically bought for concubinage. Cf. Kecia Ali, *Marriage and Slavery in Early Islam* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press 2010), especially Chapters 1 and 5.

29. One might also investigate more fully the connections between enslavement as an organized, well-regulated horror and the presence of a functioning marriage bureau operative in IS territory.

30. The full text of the letter, which was published in English and Arabic, is available as a joint release from the Council on American-Islamic Relations (CAIR) and Fiqh Council of North America as the “Open Letter to Dr. Ibrahim Awwad al-Badri, alias ‘Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi’, and to the Fighters and Followers of the Self-Declared ‘Islamic State’,” September 19, 2014 ([www.lettertobaghdadi.com](http://www.lettertobaghdadi.com)).

31. CAIR, “Groups, Individuals Asked to Endorse Open Letter Refuting ISIS’s Ideology,” September 30, 2014 ([https://www.cair.com/action\\_alerts/groups-individuals-asked-to-endorse-open-letter-refuting-isis-ideology/](https://www.cair.com/action_alerts/groups-individuals-asked-to-endorse-open-letter-refuting-isis-ideology/)). The Fiqh Council of North America participated in the DC press conference. See Zulfiqar Ali Shah, “Muslim Leaders Refute ISIS Ideology,” September 24, 2014 (<http://fiqh-council.org/muslim-leaders-refute-isis-ideology/>; updated June 3, 2016). Anti-Muslim polemicist Robert Spencer notes that though these organizations “really do oppose the Islamic State,” the letter is “a deceptive piece designed to fool gullible non-Muslim Westerners into thinking that the case for ‘moderate Islam’ has been made, but which will not change a single jihadi’s mind.” Robert Spencer, “Muslim Scholars ‘Refute’ Islamic State’s Islamic Case—While Endorsing Jihad, Sharia, Caliphate,” *Frontpage*, September 24, 2014 (<https://archives.frontpagemag.com/fpm/muslim-scholars-refute-islamic-states-islamic-case-robert-spencer/>). Spencer here conflates the issue of opposition to IS and its doctrines with the issue of how effective such opposition will be in changing the minds of jihadists.

32. A keyword search for “Open Letter to Baghdadi” at [nytimes.com](http://nytimes.com), [washingtonpost.com](http://washingtonpost.com), [bostonglobe.com](http://bostonglobe.com), [wsj.com](http://wsj.com), [guardian.co.uk](http://guardian.co.uk), [nbcnews.com](http://nbcnews.com), [abcnews.go.com](http://abcnews.go.com), and [cbsnews.com](http://cbsnews.com) on February 15, 2015, when Wood’s *Atlantic* article appeared, returned no results. A search of [bbc.co.uk](http://bbc.co.uk) returned results, none of which mentioned the letter.

33. This executive summary (“Open Letter to Al-Baghdadi,” 1–2 of the PDF version in English available at [www.lettertobaghdadi.com](http://www.lettertobaghdadi.com)), absent from the Arabic version of the letter, attests to the presumption of an English-reading audience. The list of signatories on the version released on September 19, 2014 has been supplemented by online signers. As of February 15, 2015, when Wood’s *Atlantic* article was published, forty-

nine additional people had signed, including a handful of women.

34. A few others declare acts permissible, and one declares it “obligatory to consider Yazidis as People of the Scripture.” It vacillates on jihad, declaring it neither obligatory or permissible nor forbidden but “not permissible” except under three conditions, explained as in a summary as “the right cause, the right purpose and ... the right rules of conduct.”

35. As Wood notes, it is different to say that slavery is forbidden, full stop, than to object to its reintroduction into the contemporary world. The previous existence of slavery and God’s apparent tolerance for it raises significant and subtle theological problems encompassing questions of divine will, human suffering, and theodicy. In addition to an extensive literature on justice and suffering in the classical tradition, recent theological reflections include Sherman A. Jackson, *Islam and the Problem of Black Suffering* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009); Laury Silvers, “In the Book We Have Left Out Nothing”: The Ethical Problem of the Existence of Verse 4:34 in the Qur’an,” *Comparative Islamic Studies* 2 (2006): 171–180; Kecia Ali, *Sexual Ethics and Islam: Feminist Reflections on Qur’an, Hadith, and Jurisprudence* (London: Oneworld, 2016), especially Chapter 3.

36. “Premodern Muslims were typical rather than unique in having both patriarchal marriage and slaveholding. The two coexisted throughout the ancient Near East and Mediterranean as well as in pre-Islamic Arabia” (Ali, *Marriage and Slavery in Early Islam*, 11). On the interrelated concepts of marriage and dominion, consult also 164–186.

37. I owe the phrase “emancipatory ethic” to an anonymous reviewer.

38. That this claim is factually incorrect—Saudi Arabia abolished slavery fifty years ago; Mauritania repeatedly declares abolition, as it has not fully taken—does not make it any less interesting. On abolition, consult William Gervase Clarence-Smith, *Islam and the Abolition of Slavery* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2006). Ehud Toledano’s detailed, critical review of this work illustrates the diverse and divergent modes of enslavement and slaveholding throughout Muslim-majority

and/or Muslim-ruled societies. Ehud Toledano, “Enslavement and Abolition in Muslim Societies,” *Journal of African History* 48 (2007): 481–485.

39. The Arabic text of the letter uses the term *sabāyā* for “concubines” here.

40. “The Revival of Slavery before the Hour,” *Dabiq* 4 (Dhū’l-Ḥijjah 1435 [September-October 2014]): 14–17.

41. The full quotation: “a number of contemporary scholars have mentioned that the desertion of slavery had led to an increase in *fāhishah* (adultery, fornication, etc.), because the *shar’ī* alternative to marriage is not available, so a man who cannot afford marriage to a free woman finds himself surrounded by temptation towards sin. In addition, many Muslim families who have hired maids to work at their homes, face the *fitnah* of prohibited *khalwah* (seclusion) and resultant *zinā* occurring between the man and the maid, whereas if she were his concubine, this relationship would be legal. This again is from the consequences of abandoning *jihād* and chasing after the *dunyā*” (“Revival of Slavery,” 17). The use of transliterated Arabic and Anglicized Arabic terms in *Dabiq* deserves further investigation.

42. “Revival of Slavery,” 15.

43. Umm Sumayyah al-Muhajirah, “Slave-Girls or Prostitutes?” *Dabiq* 9 (Sha‘bān 1436 [May-June 2015]): 44–49.

44. “Revival of Slavery,” 15.

45. For more on the prophecies surrounding the End Times, consult McCants, *The ISIS Apocalypse*, especially appendices 1–3, 161–178.

46. Umm Sumayyah, “Slave-Girls or Prostitutes?” appears in the “From Our Sisters” section.

47. Grewal, *Islam is a Foreign Country*, 213.

48. Anon., *Su‘āl wa-jawāb fī’l-sabī wa’l-riqāb* (Al-Dawlah al-Islāmiyyah: Dīwān al-Buḥūth wa’l-Iftā’, 1436 [2014]).

49. Anon., *Al-Sabī: Aḥkām wa-masā’il* (Al-Dawlah al-Islāmiyyah: Dīwān al-Buḥūth wa’l-Iftā’, 1435 [2013–2014]).

50. Stern and Berger, *ISIS: The State of Terror*, 3. This utopian dimension has become far more prominent in IS propaganda than it once was, while brutality has diminished. Quilliam researcher Charlie Winter finds

it the dominant theme in IS propaganda produced during a thirty-day period from mid-July to mid-August 2015, with more than half of the counted propaganda items adhering to its themes. War comes second with about 60% as many mentions of utopia. These are followed by victimhood and then small amounts of attention paid to themes of mercy, brutality, and belonging. These proportions represent significant shifts from earlier dynamics. Charlie Winter, “Documenting the Virtual ‘Caliphate’,” foreword by Haras Rafiq, *Quilliam Foundation*, October 2015 (<http://www.quilliamfoundation.org/wp/wp-content/uploads/publications/free/documenting-the-virtual-caliphate.pdf>), 17; analysis of the utopia theme in propaganda appears at pp. 30–37.

51. On sex with minors, consult Ali, *Marriage and Slavery in Early Islam*, 75–77 and *Sexual Ethics and Islam*, 182, and sources cited therein.

52. *Al-Sabī*, 9.

53. For a discussion of MEMRI and its ideological, organizational, and financial links to anti-Muslim organizations, see Christopher Bail, *Terrified: How Fringe Anti-Muslim Organizations Became Mainstream* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2015), 81–83. In his book, Bail attends to how certain ideas about who Muslims are and what they do have become prevalent. He finds that between 2001 and 2008, in a vicious and difficult-to-reverse cycle, anti-Muslim ideas and organizations moved sharply from the margin to the center of American discourses. In the year since his book was published, anti-Muslim rhetoric has become a staple of Republican presidential candidates’ campaigns. Juan Cole has also discussed the organization: “Repressive MEMRI,” *Antiwar*, November 24, 2004 (<https://original.antiwar.com/juan-cole/2004/11/24/repressive-memri-2/>).

54. MEMRI, “Islamic State (ISIS) Releases Pamphlet On Female Slaves,” December 4, 2014 (<https://www.memri.org/jttm/islamic-state-isis-releases-pamphlet-female-slaves>).

55. “Open Letter,” 18 (section 12).

56. For a similar process in Saudi fatwas, consult Ali, *Sexual Ethics and Islam*, Chapter 3.

## Response to Kecia Ali, “Redeeming Slavery”

Jessica Stern

In numerous publications, including its online magazine *Dabiq* (published in several languages), ISIS has spoken of its revival of the institution of slavery as a means of improving the moral life of its fighters and as a way to fulfill one of the “signs of the hour,” indicating the imminence of the end of time.<sup>1</sup> By sexually enslaving captive Yazidi girls, ISIS claims to believe that it is revivifying Islam, offering its followers a version of Islam that was practiced by the *salaf* (early generations of Muslims), unencumbered by hermeneutics or the accretions of historical practice. How are we to interpret these claims?

Slavery has been employed through most of human history, including during the early period of Islam. It was abolished in most countries by the end of the nineteenth century, but remained legal in a number of states in the Middle East and Africa until well into the twentieth, among them Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Yemen, Oman, and the United Arab Emirates.<sup>2</sup> Slavery is now *de jure* illegal in all nations of the world, but modern slavery—including sex trafficking, involuntary domestic servitude, and child soldiering—is a highly profitable global business, generating billions of dollars per year.<sup>3</sup> Indeed, United Nations Secretary General Ban Ki Moon refers to human trafficking as “one of the world’s most shameful ills.”<sup>4</sup>

There are numerous references to slavery and to concubinage in the *ḥadīth*, as ISIS claims and as Kecia Ali’s work confirms. But does that

make ISIS' practice of enslaving its captives "Islamic"? Some analysts and scholars have said that it does, arguing that those who reject ISIS' claim to religious legitimacy are falling into the same *takfirī* trap that ISIS has— taking it upon themselves to determine who is, and who is not, a real Muslim.<sup>5</sup>

But there is nothing uniquely Islamic about slavery. Just as Islamic texts reflect the historical period in which they were written, so too do Jewish and Christian texts. There are many references to slavery in both the Jewish and Christian bibles. For example, the book of Leviticus provides detailed instructions regarding which peoples may be taken as slaves, and rules for purchase and inheritance:

*As for your male and female slaves whom you may have: you may buy male and female slaves from among the nations that are around you. You may also buy from among the strangers who sojourn with you and their clans that are with you, who have been born in your land, and they may be your property. You may bequeath them to your sons after you to inherit as a possession forever. You may make slaves of them, but over your brothers the people of Israel you shall not rule, one over another ruthlessly.<sup>6</sup>*

Are we to refer to the practices of modern-day slave traders as Jewish or Christian because these practices are delineated in Jewish and Christian texts?

Kecia Ali proposes that ISIS' use of tradition must be seen not as a way to purify Islam by restoring it to some historical or original essence but as a means of inventing and controlling the future—both that of its caliphate and of its victims. She urges that Muslim scholars neither practice *takfir* by declaring ISIS un-Islamic nor accept the view, promulgated by Bernard Haykel and others, that ISIS has as much of a claim to religious legitimacy as anyone else.

To her arguments I would add two observations. First, ISIS is by no means unique among religious terrorists in referring to sacred texts to justify violations of both national and international laws, as well as of

contemporary religious practices and norms.<sup>7</sup> I have found in my interviews of religious terrorist groups, across religions, that it is common to justify illegal actions by referring to religious texts. Second, it seems likely that there is an additional, more pragmatic reason for ISIS' "Revival of Slavery Before the Hour": to enable them to compete successfully with rival groups fighting on behalf of Sunnis in Iraq and Syria. As ISIS implies in its own writings, it is offering an alternative to sex outside marriage for those fighters who cannot afford to marry.

In the article entitled "The Revival of Slavery Before the Hour," to which Kecia Ali has referred, the author explains:

Finally, a number of contemporary scholars have mentioned that the desertion of slavery had led to an increase in *fāhishah* (adultery or fornication, etc. [technically any sex act unregulated by *shari'ah*]), because the *shar'ī* alternative to marriage is not available, so a man who cannot afford marriage to a free woman finds himself surrounded by temptation toward sin. In addition, many Muslim families, who have hired maids to work at their homes, face the *fitnah* [trial or temptation] of prohibiting *khalwah* (seclusion) and resultant *zinā* [unlawful sexual relations between unmarried persons] between the man and the maid, where if she were his concubine, this relationship would be legal.<sup>8</sup>

Thus, it would seem, enslaving women is not only a means of avoiding sin, as Kecia Ali concludes, but is also expedient for the movement, in that fighters who can't afford to get married can be enticed to join the Islamic State with the promise of sex.

The fantasy of reviving an uncontaminated form of religious practice is not unique to ISIS. The essence of fundamentalism is longing for an imagined, purer past, an antidote to the moral and spiritual confusion of modernity. But sacred texts are filled with contradictions. Christian slaveholders and abolitionists both pointed to religious texts to justify their positions on slavery. The same can be said regarding terrorists who



kill “baby butchers” and those who, often using the same religious texts, strongly oppose violence against abortion providers. Terrorists across religions find justification in sacred texts to do what they want to do—in the case of ISIS, to rape, pillage, and plunder.

Millenarian terrorist groups are not just aiming to change or purify the world. They are also organizations *qua* organizations. Like any other non-profit or for-profit firm, terrorist organizations do not survive for long if they don’t attend to the emotional and physical needs of their workers. Just like McDonald’s or the March of Dimes, they need to attract capital and labor, and they need to articulate a brand. ISIS is using sexual slavery not only to compete for labor with rival groups, but also to raise revenue. Over time, many terrorist groups become more focused on the wellbeing of participants than achieving the mission, becoming “incentive-driven” organizations rather than “mission-driven” ones.<sup>9</sup>

Still, it is not clear that the practice of enslaving girls will help ISIS attract foreign fighters. Some ISIS “fanboys” in the West have refused to believe that the stories are true. One commentator, “AAibrah52,” wrote in response to an article in the *New York Times* that described ISIS’ practice of rape from the perspective of the victims, “What an ugly lie. You kuffar are sex obsessed.”<sup>10</sup> Another wrote, “Media getting desperate.” When her parents revealed to the media that US government officials had discovered that ISIS’ leader, Abū Bakr al-Baghdādī, had kept the American hostage Kayla Mueller as a sex slave, some ISIS fanboys expressed doubts about the veracity of the report, claiming that it was impossible to believe that Baghdādī would have sex with a white girl.<sup>11</sup>

Terrorists who have left their profession often say that “seeds of doubt” about their leaders’ integrity or true purpose led them to defect.<sup>12</sup> In my interviews of terrorists across religions, I have found that new recruits often believe that the purpose of the group, and the aim of its leader, is to change the world for the better. But over time, they are often disappointed to discover that one of the principal goals may be to enhance the political power or wealth of its leaders.<sup>13</sup> Sometimes, these “seeds of doubt” may be related to the group’s ideology. Maajid Nawaz, who left Hizb ut-Tahrir, an extremist Islamist group, explained that the

“accumulated kindness of strangers,” including non-Muslims, together with his continuing Islamic education, transformed his thinking about the group that he had initially found so attractive. He came to view the ideology he once subscribed to as “totalitarian,” “stifling,” and even “un-Islamic.”<sup>14</sup>

Defectors from ISIS have told journalists that they found themselves in an increasingly brutal regime, not at all like the utopian state that they had hoped to find. An analysis of fifty-eight of these defectors by Kings College in London revealed that some complained of mistreatment by their commanders; some were repulsed by ISIS’ practice of murdering civilians and hostages; while still others were disappointed that life in the “caliphate” was neither as lucrative, nor as thrilling, as they had anticipated.<sup>15</sup> One defector who spoke to the BBC explained, “In the beginning ISIS used goodness with the population in order to attract the people and they provided them with what they needed in order to attract them quickly, because they suffered so much under Bashar and his regime,” he said. “Once ISIS succeeded in attracting people they changed dramatically, from being good to being cruel and harsh.”<sup>16</sup> It is important to ensure that the reports of those who have seen what life in the caliphate is truly like, and have left, is shared not only with traditional media outlets, but also via the same social media outlets that ISIS uses to recruit.

## Notes

All digital content cited in this article was accessed on or before November 13, 2020.

1. See William McCants, *The ISIS Apocalypse: The History, Strategy, and Domsday Vision of the Islamic State* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2015).

2. The best resource on a timeline that we can find is the "Abolition of Slavery Timeline" on Wikipedia ([https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Abolition\\_of\\_slavery\\_timeline](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Abolition_of_slavery_timeline)).

3. Ethan B. Kapstein, "The New Global Slave Trade," *Foreign Affairs*, November/December 2006; "Trafficking in Persons Report," U.S. Department of State, July 2015 (archived at <https://2009-2017.state.gov/j/tip/rls/tiprpt/2015//index.htm>). See also Steven Pinker, *The Better Angels of Our Nature: A History of Violence and Humanity* (London: Penguin Books, 2011) and Kevin Bales, *Disposable People: New Slavery in the Global Economy, Updated with a New Preface* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2012).

4. Thirteenth United Nations Congress on Crime Prevention and Criminal Justice, Doha, April 12–19, 2015 (<https://www.un.org/en/events/crimecongress2015/about.shtml>).

5. See Graeme Wood, "What ISIS Really Wants," *The Atlantic*, March 2015.

6. Lev 25:44–46, English Standard Version (ESV). For many more examples of biblical references to—or even endorsements of—slavery, see the resource "100 Bible Verses about Slavery," OpenBible.info (<https://www.openbible.info/topics/slavery>).

7. See Jessica Stern, *Terror in the Name of God: Why Religious Militants Kill* (New York: Ecco, 2003).

8. "The Revival of Slavery Before the Hour," *Dabiq* 4 (Dhū'l-Hijjah 1435 [September–October 2014]): 17.

9. Jessica Stern with Amit Modi, "Organizational Forms of Terrorism," in Thomas Biersteker and Sue Eckert (eds.), *Countering the Financing of Terrorism* (New York: Routledge, 2008).

10. "The Islamic State is Forcing Women to Be Sex Slaves," *New York*

*Times*, August 20, 2015.

11. The issue was first revealed by Ashley Collman and the AP for The Daily Mail Online (<http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-3198571/Islamic-State-ruler-kept-26-year-old-American-air-worker-personal-sex-slave-killed-February.html>). These quotes were found utilizing J. M. Berger's Intelwire Database at the author's request. See also the Canadian Security Intelligence Service report "Al Qaeda, ISIL and Their Offspring," Chapter 10, "The Foreign Fighters Problem: Why Do Youth Join ISIL?" (<https://www.canada.ca/en/security-intelligence-service/corporate/publications/al-qaeda-isil-and-their-offspring/chapter-10-the-foreign-fighters-problem-why-do-youth-join-isil.html>), to which this author contributed.

12. This theme—that seeds of doubt led the formers to defect—was revealed at a gathering of former extremists attended by the author. The meeting, which was organized by Google Ideas, was held in Dublin from June 27–28, 2011. For more information, see <https://www.cfr.org/blog/guest-post-google-ideas-and-council-foreign-relations-team-counter-radicalization> and Jessica Stern, "Can Google Make Non-Violence Cool?", *Defining Ideas: A Hoover Institution Journal*, August 25, 2011 (<https://www.hoover.org/research/can-google-make-non-violence-cool>).

13. Stern with Modi, op. cit.

14. Christopher Dickey, "Maajid Nawaz: The Repentant Radical: A Former Extremist Warns of a Resurgent al Qaeda," *Newsweek*, October 15, 2012.

15. Peter R. Neumann, "ISCR Report – Victims, Perpetrators, Assets: The Narratives of Islamic State Defectors," International Centre for the Study of Radicalization and Political Violence, October 12, 2015 (<http://icsr.info/2015/10/icsr-report-victims-perpetrators-assets-narratives-islamic-state-defectors/>).

16. Paul Wood, "Isis [sic] Defector Speaks of Life Inside Brutal Jihadist Group," *BBC Panorama*, July 14, 2016 (<https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-28269596>). There are numerous examples of such defectors speaking to media outlets.



# ISIS, Eschatology, and Exegesis: The Propaganda of *Dabiq* and The Sectarian Rhetoric of Militant Shi'ism

Michael Pregill

## *Abstract*

The rise and successes of ISIS may at first glance appear unprecedented, and its extreme ideology as an aberrant distortion of traditional Islam. However, I will argue that some aspects of the ISIS phenomenon actually appear familiar when we consider them in deeper historical perspective, especially in the context of the kinds of arguments and rhetoric that have been employed by groups seeking to foment violence against their Muslim coreligionists. Here I will show that in its propaganda, ISIS uses themes and images drawn from the Qur'ān, as well as certain familiar tropes and topoi of Islamic history, in a fashion similar to the early Fatimid Empire, founded by a branch of the Shi'ah that established a caliphate based in North Africa and Egypt that eclipsed the Sunni caliphate of the Abbasids based in Baghdad. The ultra-militant vision of Islam and Muslim community promoted by ISIS is contrary to the ethos of Sunnism as it has generally been defined throughout its history; however, it does resemble the militant and perfectionist conception of Islam held by early sectarian groups like the Fatimids.

*Introduction*

The emergence of ISIS on the world stage seems unprecedented in modern Islamic history.<sup>1</sup> In political and military terms, the rapid evolution of the movement from an insurgency to a territorial state, or at least a quasi-state entity with pretensions of actual governance, that also maintains a terror network of significant profile and impact, is an utterly unexpected development in the sordid recent history of radical jihadism.<sup>2</sup> Further, two aspects of ISIS' policy are especially surprising, making it seem rather atavistic among modern Islamist movements. First, its brash declaration of a caliphate—with aspirations of universal recognition by the worldwide community of Muslims, however unrealistic this might be—is not entirely unprecedented, though arguably ISIS has a far more credible claim to have restored *khilāfah*, at least in the eyes of jihadist enthusiasts, than other movements before them who claimed to have done the same.<sup>3</sup> Second, not only has ISIS taken possession of actual territory over which it claims to rule, but it has rejected the national boundaries established in the Middle East in the early twentieth century by the Sykes-Picot Agreement and subsequent treaties.<sup>4</sup> Instead, ISIS aspires to establish a territorial state based in the Jazīrah, a naturally contiguous zone incorporating northwest Iraq, northeast Syria, and southeast Turkey and traversing those states' recognized borders.<sup>5</sup> Moreover, in cultural, religious, and intellectual terms, many aspects of the group's ideology and praxis—the relentless resort to *takfīr* (one Muslim asserting that another Muslim, on the basis of beliefs or actions, is actually not a Muslim but rather an infidel or *kāfir*), the revival of slavery, the public administration of extreme and appalling forms of corporeal punishment (some unprecedented in modern times)—have been so radical as to have drawn condemnation not only from virtually all state actors in the Middle East but even from Al-Qa'idah and other militant organizations.<sup>6</sup>

However, in this article, I will argue that some aspects of the ISIS phenomenon appear more familiar when we consider them in deeper historical perspective—especially if we are attuned to the predictable

logics that have typically attended Muslim groups' embrace of violence against their coreligionists. In particular, here I will show that in its propaganda, ISIS uses themes and images drawn from the Qur'ān, as well as certain familiar tropes and topoi of Islamic history, for the specific purpose of 'othering' fellow Muslims and smearing them as unbelievers, thus marking them as legitimate targets for conquest and slaughter. Other Muslim movements have made similar exegetical moves based on the Qur'ān and tradition, under similar circumstances.

The irony here—one that ISIS ideologues and spokesmen would surely not appreciate—is that they have specifically recapitulated the discursive and exegetical gestures associated with a sect of the Shi'ah that engaged in a very successful statebuilding project in the tenth century. This is the Fatimid Empire, founded by a branch of the Isma'ilis (one of the major branches of Shi'ah, each distinguished by the specific lineage of Imāms from the family of Muḥammad whom they follow) that established a caliphate based in North Africa and Egypt, dominated the eastern Mediterranean for two hundred years, and rivaled (and for a time eclipsed) the Sunni caliphate of the Abbasids based in Baghdad. ISIS' tendency to execrate Shi'ah as false Muslims, apostates and infidels, does not diminish the utility of this comparison. As we shall see, throughout the history of sectarian conflicts in Islam, Sunni and Shi'i communities have often resorted to similar, if not the same, modes of discourse and made analogous rhetorical claims, especially in the process of denouncing and delegitimizing each other.

Nor is it insignificant that this extreme rhetoric has accompanied an explicit promotion of baroque fantasies of the end of the world.<sup>7</sup> The ISIS propaganda machine strives to depict the rise of its caliphate as the fulfilment of prophecy, exploiting various developments in its campaigns against Iraqi state entities and rival insurgent groups operating in the Syrian conflict zone as major milestones in the timetable of events leading up to the End Times. Its military successes are deftly manipulated through various propaganda outlets, particularly social media, as political theater to bolster its religious credentials among supporters. The claim to be fulfilling an apocalyptic timetable has proven particularly successful for



the recruitment of foreign fighters; many of the jihadists who travel to Iraq and Syria style themselves as *muhājirūn*, after the original Muslim emigrants who joined Muḥammad on his hijrah from Mecca to Medina, or *ghurabāʾ*, ‘foreigners’ or ‘strangers,’ exploiting the prominent role assigned to the *gharīb* in traditional end-time prophecies. Likewise, the apocalyptic associations of various locales in the Syrian landscape, especially Dabiq (the Islamic version of Armageddon), allow ISIS to recast victories of little strategic value as significant triumphs in their propaganda.

Chiliastic anticipation has frequently enabled upstart movements to overthrow established regimes and seize power in Islamic history, and apocalyptic rhetoric has particular utility for casting one’s opponents and critics as servants of the Antichrist and minions of the Devil whose inevitable defeat has long been foretold. Moreover, we must recognize that when it is analyzed in a broader sociological frame, the extreme apocalyptic rhetoric of this so-called Islamic State cannot responsibly be characterized as an exclusively Islamic phenomenon. Rather, it is common to many radical groups affiliated with different religious communities found in the contemporary world, especially those seeking to harness millenarian enthusiasms in the service of aggressive statebuilding projects.

#### *Fatimid statebuilding and millenarian eschatology*

The spectacular achievements of the Fatimid Empire, both in terms of fostering a rich intellectual tradition and promoting a material culture of astonishing vigor and sophistication, are well known. At the height of their power, the Fatimids’ immediate sphere of influence encompassed not only their heartland in Egypt and North Africa but much of Palestine and Syria, southern Italy, and Sicily; their cultural impact and political reach extended as far as Spain in the west, Yemen in the south, and Iraq in the east. Most famously, the Fatimids founded the city of Cairo in 969 and established the Azhar—once a thriving center for the propagation of Ismaʿili doctrine and today a Sunni madrasa universally considered

one of the leading institutions of religious learning in the Islamic world—in 972.

What is most worthy of our attention here are the Fatimid dynasty's beginnings. Though the movement's origins in the late ninth and early tenth centuries are shrouded in a haze of hagiography and mythology, the surviving accounts still allow us to draw some solid conclusions about the nature of the group and its ideology. Like ISIS, the Fatimid regime originated in an insurgency, as one of many Isma'ili groups fomenting rebellion against the Abbasids and their governors throughout the Islamic world on behalf of the Alid *imāms* in the wake of the disappearance or 'occultation' (*ghaybah*) of the Twelfth Imām in 874. The propaganda campaign and mobilization efforts of one Isma'ili faction operating in North Africa bore fruit in 909, when a coalition of interests supported by the military power of the Kutamah Berber tribal coalition conquered the province of Ifriqiyyah (modern Tunisia) from the Aghlabids, the Abbasid governors of the region, and openly proclaimed the establishment of a new Shi'i caliphate.<sup>8</sup>

Within a century the Fatimids had conquered Egypt, constructed a new capital city—al-Qāhirah or Cairo—and asserted their dominion over most of the Islamic world from the Levant westward. In this they presented a vigorous counterpart to the senescent Abbasid dynasty, which had already experienced a significant deterioration of its political (if not moral) authority in Iraq, as well as a significant challenge to Sunni claims about the caliphate. It has also often been observed that it was under the Fatimids that extensive networks of cultural and economic exchange throughout the Mediterranean were established or revived, thus fostering intercontinental trade and travel from Western Europe and so eventually paving the way for the eastward campaigns and migrations of Latin peoples during the Crusades.

Aside from these specific political and military details, a distinctive aspect of the Fatimid rise to power is their reliance on millenarian eschatology in their ideology and propaganda. The Fatimid caliph-*imāms* claimed to be descended directly from 'Alī b. Abī Ṭālib and Fāṭimah, the daughter of the Prophet Muḥammad, and clearly presented their rise to

power as a transformative millenarian event in world history. This was signaled, above all, by the fact that the first Fatimid caliph-*imām*, ‘Abd Allāh, took the regnal title of “the Rightly-Guided One” or Mahdī (‘Guided One,’ a messianic figure who will marshal the true Muslims and stand as God’s champion in the final conflict that will precede the advent of the Last Judgment), thus exploiting the fervent belief among the partisans of the family of the Prophet that their redemption was imminent.<sup>9</sup> As we shall see, the parallel with ISIS here is exceptionally striking, for the Islamic State’s propaganda claims that the end of the world is immanent, the establishment of its caliphate and its campaigns of conquest in Iraq and Syria serving as proof of its fulfillment of prophecy in playing a key role in the dramatic events leading up to the Hour, the Islamic *eschaton*.<sup>10</sup>

An anonymous manuscript in the Arabic collections of the British Library (BL Or. 8419) offers us a unique glimpse of early Fatimid propaganda and its complex interweaving of qur’ānic prooftexts, biblical and Islamic history, sectarian claims, and millenarianism.<sup>11</sup> This anonymous work is non-technical in nature, which distinguishes it from most texts associated with the Isma’ilis in general and the Fatimids specifically. It addresses itself to an ordinary, though literate, Muslim audience and does not rely on either veiled language or esoteric arguments comprehensible only to initiates to support its main points—a conspicuous marker of Isma’ili tradition already in the formative period of the ninth century, and a signal feature of most of the surviving literature associated with the Fatimids.<sup>12</sup> Rather, on the basis of Qur’ān and *ḥadīth* alone, this work argues that although the Muslim community originally followed the guidance of the Prophet Muḥammad, they have now gone astray like other communities that went before them, particularly the Jews. It is only the Shi’ah who follow the correct path, and so constitute a kind of saved minority, as opposed to the masses who might call themselves Muslims but are really no better than Jews or the idolaters and hypocrites who opposed Muḥammad and his family during their lifetimes.

The text makes this argument by drawing on a group of *ḥadīth* that may collectively be called the “Sunnah Tradition.”<sup>13</sup> Alluding to or explicitly citing qur’ānic references to the communities and nations that pre-

ceded the coming of Islam, these traditions depict Muḥammad outlining the essence of Islam for his followers and asserting its superiority to other paths; but he also issues a stern warning that his community will go astray just as older communities did. Most often this warning is phrased as a prophecy that the Muslims “will follow the path of those who came before you”; the term for path here is usually *sabīl* (pl. *subul*), but in some variations it is *sunnah* (pl. *sunan*), and sometimes the path is explicitly noted as the path of Israel (*sunnat banī isrāʾīla*)—meaning that the Muslim *ummah*, or at least part of it, is doomed to repeat the errors of the Jews and Christians who preceded them.

The Fatimid text cites a number of variations on this *ḥadīth*:

[The Prophet said:] “...You will surely travel along the paths of those who came before you, walking in their footsteps; you will surely follow their example, every inch, every foot, every mile they traveled—to the degree that if they entered a dark lizard hole, you’ll do it too.”<sup>14</sup>

Across the centuries this tradition has been used in a number of ways. It is commonly cited in connection with Muḥammad’s prophecy that his community will split into seventy (or seventy-two) sects, as our author acknowledges:

So did the Prophet warn his community against factionalism and differing among themselves (*al-furqah waʾl-ikh-tilāf*); and he informed them that they would surely do as the communities who came before them had done. Thus he said: “You will surely follow the *sunnah* of Israel, measure for measure and like for like.”<sup>15</sup>

This tradition is also very commonly cited as the basis for the polemical claim made by Sunni authors that the Shiʿah are “the Jews of our community” (*yahūd ummatinā*). As Wasserstrom has demonstrated in his classic discussion of this tradition, a variety of Sunni authors drew on

this trope to characterize the Shi'ah as erring in both belief and practice in recognizably 'Jewish' ways.<sup>16</sup>

However, the Fatimid text provides an intriguing example of how Shi'ah could make use of this tradition in an analogous way, but for the opposite purpose of delegitimizing the path followed by those who rejected their claims and the cause of the Alids.<sup>17</sup> The text is distinctive for the systematic way in which it draws parallels between events in biblical, prophetic, and early Islamic history and the situation of the Shi'ah in the author's present (most likely the early tenth century). Sometimes this is done through simile: for example, it compares Pharaoh and the Egyptians who oppressed the Israelites and the "oppressors of the family of Muḥammad" who victimized the *imāms* and their followers.<sup>18</sup> At other times the telescoping of history is accomplished through metaphor: the persecutors of the family of the Prophet and their supporters—i.e., Sunnis—are labeled idolaters and tyrants, "the Pharaohs of Quraysh."

In still other instances, the pejorative appellation "the Jews of our community" appears, a clear reversal of the trope of the Shi'ah as the Jews of the community as it is commonly deployed in Sunni polemic. As the Fatimid text develops this image, the persecution of the Alids and their loyal partisans, the Shi'ah, marks Sunnis as oppressors and infidels. Their denial of the claims of the Alid *imāms* as sole legitimate leaders of the community hearkens back to the Jews' denial of Muḥammad's claims, one of many ways they are like Jews and no better than Jews:

The Jews allege that their faith in God and in Moses and the other former prophets suffices for them, so that they do not need faith in Muḥammad... Likewise the Jews of our community claim that their faith in Muḥammad suffices for them, making unnecessary faith in the Imām of the God-fearers [i.e. 'Alī]...<sup>19</sup>

This telescoping of history, the alignment of the travails faced by the pre-Islamic prophets and their loyal followers, the Prophet Muḥammad and his family, and the Alid *imāms* and their partisans the Shi'ah,

particularly in the author's present, is typical of the 'hiero-historical' perspective found in Fatimid texts. Like other Shi'i movements of the time, the Fatimids distinguished between the *zāhir* or external meaning of scripture and ritual and the inner, essential meaning, the *bāṭin*, which could be disclosed only through exegesis by delegates of the inspired *imāms*, to whom God had entrusted true knowledge. This exegesis of the inner dimension of scripture—the spiritual, but also frequently political, interpretation accessible only to a few—is termed *ta'wīl*, disclosure of the essence or 'foundational' meaning.<sup>20</sup>

What makes this typological exegesis of the Fatimids and other Shi'i groups so powerful is that it embeds the present in a kind of timeless scriptural now: contemporary experience is not so different from that of bygone days, and the present appears as the natural culmination of the scriptural past. The oppression of evildoers in all ages is the same; the suffering of the faithful in all ages is the same. The political implications of scripture are brought to the fore. Pharaoh oppressed the Israelites; the Jews persecuted Jesus and the apostles; the hypocrites and idolaters opposed Muḥammad; the Umayyads slaughtered the *imāms* of the family of the Prophet. Throughout history, the pattern recurs until the time of the Mahdī, who like Moses will punish the idolaters and redeem the Shi'ah, bringing them to their Promised Land.<sup>21</sup>

Thus, this anonymous propaganda text is unusual in that it both offers a window onto the ideology of the Fatimids in the foundational period of their history, when their embrace of violent revolution was most conspicuous, and presents a set of rhetorical features intended to be legible and even appealing to a wide public due to their grounding in qur'ānic texts and early Islamic history. In what follows here, I will observe a number of striking parallels between claims and ideas promoted by ISIS and those of the early Shi'ah in general and the Fatimid movement as exemplified by this work in particular.

It is important that we be clear about the nature and purpose of our comparison of ISIS with this militant Shi'i dynasty. After all, ISIS is a militant Sunni organization whose genealogy is more commonly traced back to precursor insurgent movements of a radical Salafi orientation,

though its ideology involves a reliance on *takfir* and a willful targeting of Muslim civilians that even Al-Qa'idah and its various offshoots and affiliates reject. Further, drawing parallels between Muslim groups separated by a millennium may seem dangerously ahistorical to some. Our point here, however, is that the ultra-militant vision of Islam and Muslim community held by the spokesmen of ISIS and expressed in their propaganda is not only contrary to the ethos of Sunnism as it has been conventionally defined throughout its history, but, if anything, hearkens back to the militant and perfectionist conception of Islam held by early sectarian groups.<sup>22</sup> The ideology of the Fatimid Caliphate thus furnishes a thousand year-old precedent not only for ISIS' rapid transition from an insurgency to a successful statebuilding project, but also for important aspects of their doctrine and propaganda as well. As we shall see, the results of such comparison are illustrative and provocative.

### *ISIS' sectarian apocalypse*

Despite its officious claims to be the legitimate heir to and revival of the long-defunct Sunni caliphate, the ISIS movement is quite demonstrably deviant in terms of the standard set of values and practices historically associated with Sunnism. Its spokesmen present themselves as restoring the golden age of imperial Islam, particularly the period of the Rashīdūn or "Righteous Caliphs" who ruled for the first thirty years of Islamic history, that period during which apostolic Islam was supposedly at its strongest and purest. They are also quite nostalgic for the high Abbasid period, the apogee of the Sunni caliphate as an institution and a world power. This is surely not accidental given that the Abbasids represented the pinnacle of caliphal power in Iraq in particular, ruling from Baghdad for just over five hundred years—first as a vigorous, expansionist state, and then, after a long period of decline in the ninth and tenth centuries, as a severely attenuated, but still nominally and symbolically authoritative, shadow of its former self.<sup>23</sup> However, the ideology of ISIS—now broadcast through various means as part of a sophisticated propaganda machine heavily reliant on social media networks in particular

—actually more closely resembles that of the Fatimids in their early history than that of the classical Sunni caliphate.

ISIS most clearly resembles the Fatimid precursor in the conspicuous conjunction of two elements in its rhetoric and propaganda: an immanent or already realized millenarianism and an unambivalent embrace of violence against other Muslims. Regarding the first, it is entirely clear from the various propaganda statements ISIS has made through a variety of outlets that its leadership views itself—or at least presents itself—as having fulfilled a number of traditional prophecies concerning a sequence of political events that are understood to be harbingers of the *fitan* or struggles of the End Times, which will eventually usher in the arrival of the Mahdī and the conflicts that will culminate in Judgment Day.<sup>24</sup> As already noted, the Fatimids claimed that the caliph who established their rule in North Africa in 909 was the Mahdī, and that their caliphate represented both the culmination of history and the transformation of the world order. Millenarian anticipation has frequently been a conspicuous feature of modern Shi’i movements as well, especially the theocratic regime of the Islamic Republic of Iran, which appears to stem from a longstanding emphasis on a chiliastic or messianic political ideology among modern Twelvers in particular.<sup>25</sup>

In contrast, the ideologies of Salafism and Wahhabism that have generally provided the doctrinal resources for Sunni jihadist groups have historically been far less prone to apocalypticism and messianism.<sup>26</sup> ISIS has enthusiastically adopted an apocalyptic orientation that has had some traction in the Sunni world for a number of decades now, one that is given credibility and authority through reference to a corpus of eschatological *ḥadīth* that have always had an ambiguous status in Sunni learned circles. Thus, ISIS claims that the caliphate of Abū Bakr al-Baghdādī is a crucial step on the path towards the apocalyptic final battle between the forces of Islam and “Rome” (the West) that will culminate in the end of the world and the ultimate triumph of Islam.

While the leadership cadres of older Sunni movements fostering international jihad like Al-Qa’idah have at the very most only hinted that their struggles have apocalyptic significance, millenarian tendencies



have been simmering in the rank and file of the jihadist underground for some time now.<sup>27</sup> The centrality of such claims in ISIS' propaganda and doctrine may be due to these ideas gaining greater purchase throughout the Islamic world in general over the last decade, or in the jihadist underground more specifically. Admittedly, it is also possible that such ideas have been prominent for some time, or even on the upswing, and simply escaped the notice of outside commentators until recently. ISIS' tendency to broadcast its ideology primarily in English through various propaganda channels has served to remove whatever ambiguity about their goals and motivations might have formerly prevailed in the Western media.<sup>28</sup>

The second major area of similarity between ISIS and the Fatimids is the former's unambivalent willingness to not only harm other Muslims, but to actually make use of various rhetorical instruments to deny their status as Muslims to justify aggression against them. In early Islamic history, the reigns of the Rāshidūn and the Umayyads thrived on the massive successes of their campaigns of conquest against pagan Arab tribes, other polities in Arabia, and then the Eastern Roman and Sasanian empires. Under the Abbasids—whose rise was in no small part due both to the decline of the expansionist military order upon which the Umayyads had depended and the redirection of potent military forces in the east back towards the center for the purpose of regime change—outward expansion of the borders of the Islamic world slowed.<sup>29</sup> However, even the Abbasids conducted regular jihad against the Byzantines and other neighboring polities and legitimated themselves thereby. This was also true of the new Muslim states that gained autonomy as the central authority of the Abbasids gradually broke down, for example the breakaway Umayyad state in Spain that openly declared its claim to be the legitimate caliphate in 929 and flourished for a century, largely by preying upon much weaker Christian principalities in the north.

Other, more recent Muslim statebuilding enterprises—some of them caliphates—were forced to sustain themselves and expand by waging war against communities of their fellow Muslims, legitimizing this in a variety of ways. From the Middle Ages to the early modern period, jihads

were proclaimed in numerous places throughout the Islamic world, as often to muster religious support for offensive or defensive campaigns against Muslim powers as to expand the borders of the *dār al-Islām* at the expense of neighboring Christian principalities, or defend against Christian expansion at Muslim expense. What a survey of the different circumstances in which jihad was proclaimed from the thirteenth century onwards reveals is that various Muslim religious authorities were willing to justify expansion of their states or communities by victimizing their fellow Muslims, usually by finding ways to describe their Islam as somehow not genuine or deficient in some significant way. Ibn Taymiyyah, who legitimated Mamluk warfare against the Ilkhanids of Iran, offers the classic example of this tendency. Unsurprisingly, many modern jihadist movements draw on Ibn Taymiyyah's work to legitimate insurgency against Muslim regimes.<sup>30</sup>

What seems to distinguish ISIS as a modern version of this phenomenon is its continuation of older, pre-modern tendencies synthesized with more contemporary jihadist ideology, especially their propounding of radical *takfir* as the justification for fostering a state of war against infidels and Muslims alike, including lethal aggression against Muslim state entities, rival jihadist insurgencies, and even civilian populations. The recent study of Rajan vividly describes the significant transitions that have occurred in the international jihadist movement with the shift from Al-Qa'idah and its affiliates, who generally maintained a disciplined resistance to *takfir* in favor of garnering popular support among the widest possible Muslim constituency, and the full-throated embrace of *takfir* by ISIS and its affiliates, which Rajan characterizes as nothing short of genocidal.<sup>31</sup>

The extreme behaviors embraced by ISIS, more radical and savage than practically any Islamist group previously known, has provoked substantial debate in some circles as to whether or not ISIS is authentically "Islamic." The debate centers on whether one sees ISIS as an outgrowth of certain prevalent trends in Islamic history, particularly older forms of militant Sunnism, or rather one sees their extremism as simply placing it beyond the bounds of anything one might legitimately call "Islam,"

defined by the historical experience and beliefs of Muslim communities throughout the world as well as the majority consensus on how Islam and Sunnism should be defined.

This debate is deeply inflected by the larger social and political context in contemporary North America and Europe, in which Islamophobic institutions and ideologues compete for the political capital that accrues to parties that rail loudly against the “Islamic threat.” This has the effect of marginalizing minority Muslim communities in Western societies that struggle to dissociate themselves from ISIS and other radical groups in the public eye, yet are continually subject to the kinds of hostility and discrimination that not only alienates the moderate majority but can radicalize more vulnerable and less assimilated elements at the edges of those communities. Thus, the academic debate over whether ISIS’ deviance from so many norms renders it essentially beyond the pale of what can reasonably be recognized as Islam has occurred against a background of implicit or even explicit claims that ISIS and other violent movements actually *epitomize* Islam—a contention that any objective observer would find both historically and conceptually untenable, yet has repeatedly been revived by right-wing politicians in France, America, and other Western countries.<sup>32</sup>

There is some irony to this situation, because ISIS spokesmen themselves are intensely interested in the question of who is and isn’t really Muslim and what is or isn’t legitimately Islam. In fact, it is their extreme rhetoric on this issue that is one of the hallmarks of the ISIS movement, and marks it as completely aberrant in traditional Sunni terms. Predictably, the ISIS movement’s definition of “true Islam” is a rather narrow one. At various points in its history the movement has alienated various allies—to say nothing of larger Muslim publics, even those sympathetic to Islamist insurgency—on account of its willingness to target civilians and brand rival groups as apostates as a pretext to justify intimidation and actual aggression against them.<sup>33</sup> Yet radical groups seldom if ever concede that they actually are radical, and ISIS is no exception. Rather, they use nomenclature in a subtle way to cast their positions as original, authentic, and essential to Islam, while characterizing those who hold

different opinions and insist on a different definition of Islam to be outsiders and deviants.

Thus, in its propaganda, the movement frequently refers to itself and its followers simply as “the Muslims,” though this term is restricted to those who support their cause and claims, accept their authority, and acquiesce to living under their rule. By labeling the subjects of their caliphate simply as “Muslims,” ISIS both naturalizes the concept of its sovereignty and presents itself as authentically Islamic and perfectly mainstream: they are *the* Islamic State, defined by their claim of authority over “Muslims” in general, commensurate with the traditional conception of caliphal sovereignty as universal. In contrast, those who resist, object, or pledge their loyalty elsewhere are marked as deviant and sectarian using a host of familiar labels such as *murtadd* (apostate) or *munāfiq* (hypocrite), and seldom if ever dignified by being recognized as Muslims.<sup>34</sup>

Somewhat more obscurely, ISIS propaganda refers to Shi’ah— whether Iraqis or Iranians—as “Şafawīs,” or “Safavids.” This is a reference to the dynasty that ruled Iran from the sixteenth to the eighteenth century, during which time the majority of the country was converted to Twelver Shi’ism.<sup>35</sup> This label serves three rhetorical purposes. First, like the other labels for noncompliant or “deviant” Muslims employed by ISIS, it brands Shi’ah as something other than simply Muslim, emphasizing Sunnism as the norm or mainstream that ISIS represents and from which its opponents deviate. Second, it asserts a relatively recent origin for Shi’i communities in the area, despite Shi’ism’s long history in Iran and especially Iraq, in contrast to the original form of Islam that ISIS would claim its particular interpretation of Sunnism represents.<sup>36</sup> Finally, it links Iraqi Shi’i communities to Iran, marking them as foreign and outsiders, in contrast to the native Iraqi origins of much of the ISIS leadership (never mind the fact that Abū Muṣ‘ab al-Zarqawī, ISIS’ spiritual godfather, was a Jordanian and many of its supporters are foreigners or at least foreign-born).<sup>37</sup>

Historically, one of the classic characteristics of Sunnism is its big tent ideology—a rejection of sectarianism and embrace of diversity of opinion. However, there is a perennial tendency found among some Sunni

authorities to emphasize Sunnism as original and essential, “true” Islam, at the expense of that very avoidance of extremism and acceptance of diversity that is at the core of historical, majoritarian Sunnism. It is these elements within the Sunni fold that have gravitated towards *takfir* as a means of imposing their views, enforcing compliance with their definition of orthodoxy, and policing the boundaries between what they define as true Islam and error. The paradox is that labeling a fellow Muslim an infidel based on their supposedly deviant words or deeds is generally perceived as objectionable in Sunnism, but many Sunni religious authorities have leaned in the direction of castigating those who engage in questionable practices, are insufficiently strenuous in their piety, or adopt “heretical” dogmas as being virtually or actually beyond the pale of what can be called Islam.<sup>38</sup>

Despite this, the willingness to explicitly and unambiguously mark fellow Muslims as outsiders is rather more conspicuous as a sectarian tendency; this is one of the most obvious ways in which ISIS moves away from what is traditionally considered the consensus positions of Sunnism and towards others more readily associated with groups that were historically at the fringes of mainstream Muslim society. It is important to emphasize here that the various communities of Zaydi, Isma’ili, and Twelver Shi’ah are today generally much more accommodating towards Sunnis in both their theology and their social practices. The Nizari Isma’ilis in particular have become well-known for their promotion of tolerance and a progressive ecumenism through the various philanthropic initiatives supported by their spiritual leader, HH The Aga Khan. However, many schools of Shi’ah originally espoused a militant ideology that rejected Sunnis—really anyone who failed to accept their claims—as heretics no better than infidels, thus deliberately taking up a counter-establishment position. This is a tendency that the Fatimids inherited from those earlier militant groups, which articulated doctrinal positions of radical anti-Sunnism as a politically expedient means of delegitimizing established regimes that marginalized and persecuted the Shi’ah. As we have noted, part of the militant posture of the Fatimid propaganda text is rejecting the Sunni position as illegitimate by using specific negative

epithets for Sunnis, referring to them as idolaters, Pharaohs, and the “Jews of our community.” The use of code terms to mark insiders and outsiders is a mainstay of sectarian discourse more broadly, but the parallel with ISIS’ refusal to acknowledge its opponents as “Muslims,” terming them apostates, hypocrites, Şafawīs, and so forth, is particularly striking.<sup>39</sup>

Overall, the rationale behind the use of such language, whether in the tenth or the twenty-first century, is not difficult to discern. Extolling the virtues of one’s supporters as the true Muslims, those who are most closely aligned with the spirit of Muḥammad’s teachings and whose actions are cast as predetermined, the very fulfilment of prophecy, is an obvious method of legitimizing a clear minority position. Conversely, ‘othering’ one’s fellow Muslims as outsiders, no better than *dhimmi*s or infidels, has the effect of justifying their conquest, subordination, and, if they resist, their enslavement or annihilation, as if they were not Muslims at all. Calling the integrity of the Islam of one’s opponents into question and marking them as legitimate targets of violence gains particular urgency in an atmosphere saturated with apocalypticism, especially because the traditional prophecies explicitly assert that a state of civil war, *fitnah*, will inevitably precede the coming of the Mahdī. This is the exact reason why traditions on the terrible events of the End Times are labeled *fitan* (the plural of *fitnah*), after the extreme internecine struggles that will erupt within the community as harbingers of apocalypse.

*Waiting for the flood: Qur’ānic exegesis, prophetic history, and “intellectual terrorism”*

The ISIS movement’s invocation of the Qur’ān, *ḥadīth*, and other classical sources of Islam in its propaganda has attracted significant attention since they first rose to international prominence with their capture of Mosul, Iraq’s second-largest city, in the beginning of the summer of 2014. However, when we peruse *Dabiq*, the group’s English-language propaganda magazine, what we find is that their interpretation

of the Qurʾān is typically implicit and allusive rather than overt and direct. An example of this is the extended use of a specific qurʾānic theme in an early issue of *Dabiq*, namely that of Noah's Ark.

This theme is treated prominently in the second issue of *Dabiq*; its cover features a dramatic image of the Ark in a storm-tossed sea, with captions highlighting the two main features contained therein: "It's Either the Islamic State or the Flood" and "The Flood of the Mubāhalah." Rather than engage in direct and systematic commentary on the Qurʾān, the author of the first piece, one 'Abū 'Amr al-Kinānī,' ruminates on the theme of Noah and the flood that destroyed his sinning people; his interpretation communicates a sophisticated message about the Islamic State and its various claims.<sup>40</sup> As an example of sectarian, politically motivated exegesis, ISIS' approach to the qurʾānic topos of the flood offers us yet another point of comparison with the Fatimids and other militant Shi'i movements, as it has much more in common with the *taʾwīl* exegesis practiced by Shi'i commentators on the Qurʾān than it does with classical Sunni *tafsīr*.

In the Qurʾān, the story of Noah is similar to that of the Bible in its overall contours: God warns Noah of the impending destruction that He will cause by submerging the earth beneath a great deluge; Noah is commanded to save his family by building an ark, to the ridicule of his contemporaries; subsequently, God's foretold punishment for the sins of humanity is realized and all living beings except those ensconced safely on the Ark perish. The Bible describes all this in detail in Genesis 6–9, while these details are largely just presupposed in the qurʾānic versions of the narrative. However, the qurʾānic understanding of the narrative differs from that of the Bible in various ways as well. For one thing, in the Qurʾān there is very little description of the making of the Ark, the coming of the deluge, or the destruction it wreaks on the earth, as in Genesis. Instead, in keeping with the tendency to 'flatten' the biblical stories of the prophets into their most basic details and emphasize their most readily generalized elements, the qurʾānic versions of the story tend to place great emphasis on a theme that is entirely absent from the account in Genesis but resonates with the stories of other prophets found

in the Qurʾān: Noah's engagement with his wayward people to try to persuade them to repent and their obstinate rejection of his message.<sup>41</sup>

This element of the Qurʾānic portrayal of the Noah story is significant because it is exactly the aspect of the story that ISIS emphasizes in this piece in *Dabiq*. The story is invoked in the context of a polemic against Muslims whom they dub the "proponents of choice" or simply "the pacifists." These people claim that coercion is wrong, and that Muslims should not impose their views on others by force; all people should have the freedom to choose to believe or not to believe as they personally see fit. This is a traditional posture found among Sunnis and Shi'is alike, generally based on a reading of Q Baqarah 2:256, *there is no coercion in religion, for truth has been clearly distinguished from falsehood*.<sup>42</sup> As ISIS spokesmen see it, however, the Qurʾānic Noah story presents clear proof that this liberal ideal of free, unfettered choice in matters of faith is wrong, insofar as the story presents a clear opposition between salvation through cleaving to the truth and imminent destruction. The critical aspect of the exegesis of the story that is presented (or implied) here is that, in the view of ISIS' spokesman, the coming of the flood *cannot* be construed as God's punishment on the infidels of Noah's time due to their disbelief, as is commonly presupposed. It is perhaps natural to think so; this is certainly the basic understanding of the story in the Bible, and the Qurʾān simply asserts that the unbelievers of Noah's time were destroyed in the deluge and subsequently damned to perdition in the afterlife.<sup>43</sup> The relationship between these two separate facts, which may readily be interpreted as different aspects of God's punishment upon the disbelievers, is not typically perceived to be problematic.

However, ISIS' spokesmen do see a logical problem here. The Qurʾān repeatedly asserts that the punishment exacted for *kufṛ* is damnation to Hellfire; so perishing in the flood cannot be a punishment for this sin *per se*. So what is it? We may admire the ingenuity of ISIS' exegete here in discerning the answer, if only to recognize the adroit way that what he perceives as a theological problem in the narrative provides him with an expedient pretext for articulating a political doctrine important to ISIS. If those who deny God are doomed to Hellfire, the flood can only



be read as an *instrument of coercion*, a threat of physical destruction that backs up Noah's call to his people to repent. Essentially, Noah issues a harsh threat to his people, believe or else; come with me and be saved, otherwise drown and be damned. The threat is a legitimate means of coercion intended to pressure people to submit to Noah's message; it is part of his characteristic "methodology."<sup>44</sup> 'Abū 'Amr' even goes so far as to state that if someone were to have believed in Noah's basic message of repentance, but claimed that he had no right to coerce people to follow him, that denial of his prerogative to resort to coercion in and of itself would constitute *kufr*.<sup>45</sup>

Strikingly, Noah's approach or "methodology" is here openly characterized as "intellectual terrorism." It was his intention to scare people into believing with the threat of imminent destruction: "He told them with full clarity, 'It's me or the Flood'"—the phrase that inspires the title of this feature in *Dabiq*.<sup>46</sup> Further drawing on the image of Noah's Ark, 'Abū 'Amr' emphasizes that only those who cleave to ISIS, associate with their movement, pledge obedience to their caliph, and follow their teachings can be saved: "in every time and place, those who are saved from the punishment are a small group, whereas the majority are destroyed."<sup>47</sup>

ISIS' use of this imagery to communicate a basic point from their political doctrine is particularly striking, because the image of Noah's Ark is commonly employed in Shi'i tradition as a figure for their communitarian theology. There is a well-known prophetic *ḥadīth* that states that *fitnah* would come to flood the community, and the only way to salvation would be to follow the Ahl al-Bayt or "People of the House," that is, the Prophet's family.<sup>48</sup> The Shi'ah have long interpreted this tradition to mean that only those who recognize and obey the *imāms* from the family of 'Alī, the leaders recognized by their community, will find safe refuge from the worldly conflicts that will (or have) rent the Muslim *ummah*; they alone will survive the "flood" of *fitnah* and achieve both worldly and ultimate salvation. Noah's Ark has thus been a favorite motif of Shi'i visual culture for many centuries.<sup>49</sup> It is a natural image for a path to salvation chosen by and available only to the very few.<sup>50</sup> Given its recurring emphasis on the tiny minority that have always followed the pro-

phets and *imāms*, it is unsurprising that our Fatimid text cites this tradition:

[The Prophet said:] “Truly, I see *fitnah* seeping into your homes like rainfall... But my House is like Noah’s Ark; the one who boards it is saved, and the one who spurns it is drowned. That is, the one who follows the path of my family and cleaves to it will not be drowned in *fitnah* like the people of Noah were drowned in water...”<sup>51</sup>

The invocation of this imagery of the Ark and the Flood in both *Dabiq* and the Fatimid text demonstrates in a vivid way that there are certain symbols and ideas that have historically had significant traction among Muslim groups that seek to utilize them for specific purposes. For ISIS, the Ark that saves from *fitnah* or communal strife (as well as serving, ultimately, as the sole vehicle for salvation) is not loyalty to the family of the Prophet, as in our Fatimid text, but rather, as seen here in *Dabiq*, immigrating to join ISIS to fight for the Islamic State under the banner of their caliph.<sup>52</sup> For ISIS, as for the Fatimids, only that tiny minority that recognizes its claims and pledges obedience to them can be saved: to quote *Dabiq* again, “in every time and place, those who are saved from the punishment are a small group, whereas the majority are destroyed.” In a strikingly similar way to the militant Shi’ah who sought to gain support for their resistance to Sunni authorities over a thousand years ago, ISIS’ rhetorical goal is to valorize the path of an elite minority and to justify a posture of extreme militancy in support of their statebuilding project and their extreme political doctrines and claims.<sup>53</sup>

#### *Calling down God’s curse: Prophetic precedent and political intimidation*

ISIS’ message is further distinguished by a unique exegetical flourish found here in *Dabiq*. As noted above, this is a special issue of *Dabiq* devoted to the theme of the Flood, with two separate pieces on this included therein: first “It’s either the Islamic State or the Flood,” the piece on

Noah's intellectual terrorism discussed above, and then a second item, a feature entitled "The Flood of the Mubāhalah."<sup>54</sup>

Understanding the significance of this term *mubāhalah* requires some familiarity with the traditional account of early Islamic history. According to that traditional account, delegates from the Christian community of Najrān, the center of Arabian Christianity in the Prophet Muḥammad's day, once came to see him and disputed with him over theological questions pertaining to the nature of Jesus. In response, God revealed the qur'ānic verse which is now Q Āl 'Imrān 3:61:

*If anyone disputes with you about this now, after knowledge of the matter has come to you, Say: 'Let us get together, our sons and your sons, our daughters and your daughters, us and you, and let us earnestly pray, and invoke the curse of God on those who lie.'*

The phrase "let us invoke the curse" renders Arabic *nabtahil*, from the verb *ibtahala*; if two parties do this in opposition to one another, the appropriate verbal form is *tabāhala*, from which the noun *mubāhalah*, a mutual imprecation, derives. Muḥammad received this verse from God, brought the members of his family together, and then faced off against the Christians, who backed down because they were intimidated, too frightened to call down God's wrath as warrant for the claims they made about Jesus. Ever after, this event has been called the *mubāhalah*.<sup>55</sup>

This episode from the *Sīrah* is very important for Shi'ah, who understand it to establish a significant role for Muḥammad's family as witnesses to and warrants for divine truth. While the Christians of Najrān gathered learned adult men as their witnesses, Muḥammad is sometimes described as coming to the assembly with only four people accompanying him: 'Alī, Fāṭimah, and their sons Ḥasan and Ḥusayn. This is one of a handful of events that seems to establish that Muḥammad's close relatives possessed a special authority and knowledge based on their intimate relationship with him; the Prophet's bringing

them (and *only* them) to the confrontation implies an elevated status for these individuals above all others, even a kind of partnership.<sup>56</sup> Shi'i sources, including our Fatimid text, thus make much of this tradition, as it seems to establish the special authority of the *imāms* of the Ahl al-Bayt.<sup>57</sup>

For ISIS, this episode is important for a different reason. Astonishingly, the ISIS leadership *has actually done this*. Originally entering the Syrian conflict in 2011 as ISIS' proxy, the insurgent group most commonly called Jabhat al-Nuṣrah quickly came to differ with the leaders of the Islamic State over both strategy and tactics; by 2013 Jabhat al-Nuṣrah had split from ISIS and the two groups commenced excoriating each other in social media.<sup>58</sup> In early 2014 the leadership of Jabhat al-Nuṣrah began openly denouncing the ISIS leadership as Khārijites, invoking the name of this notorious sect from early Islamic history to imply that ISIS had left the Sunni fold due to its members' extremism and open acts of violence against other Muslims.<sup>59</sup> In response, ISIS spokesman Abū Muḥammad al-ʿAdnānī invited the leadership of Jabhat al-Nuṣrah (whom they derogatorily refer to as Jabhat al-Jawlānī, after Abū Muḥammad al-Jawlānī, the head of the organization) to a public dispute and a *mubāhalah* to settle their grievances.

Here in Dabiq, the rationale and legitimacy of this action is explained in a few pages in a piece entitled "The Flood of Mubāhalah." Intriguingly, the circumstances under which ISIS initiated this action receive less attention than the lengthy explanation of historical precedents for it. In particular, the author notes that Muḥammad never asserted that only his summoning of God's curse against the Christians of Najrān was legitimate. Rather, various authorities are cited supporting the permissibility of the practice in the time after Muḥammad, and a number of examples of scholars invoking God's curse in a *mubāhalah* against their rivals in legal and doctrinal disputes are supplied.<sup>60</sup>

Why the *mubāhalah* against Jabhat al-Nuṣrah is to be likened to a flood is not noted here; nor is the connection to the flood of Noah's time explicitly parsed. However, we can infer, in light of the preceding piece "It's Either the Islamic State or the Flood," that a connection to Noah's preaching to his people, specifically his threatening them with destruc-

tion as “intellectual terrorism,” is implied. This is exactly what the ISIS leadership believes Muḥammad was doing with the *mubāhalah*, essentially intimidating the Christians of Najrān into acquiescing to his claims and abandoning their own, since he knew he was right and they were wrong, and God would intervene directly to vindicate him. Further, this is what ISIS spokesmen see themselves as doing: committing intellectual terrorism against doctrinal rivals—or actual violence against people who will not submit to them—as a legitimate means of coercing submission and acquiescence to their claims. They believe themselves to be in the right so strongly that they are willing to invoke God’s curse on any who gainsay them. Moreover, since there is a well-known prophetic precedent for this behavior, ISIS immediately gains the rhetorical advantage of being able to claim to be following in the footsteps not only of various Salafi icons like Ibn Taymiyyah and Ibn ‘Abd al-Wahhāb, but obviously of the Prophet himself.<sup>61</sup> This is but one of many examples of ways in which ISIS and its supporters deliberately blur the distinction between past and present and hearken back to the golden age of Islam’s founding that they idealize.<sup>62</sup>

### *Valorizing violence at the end of days*

The striking commonalities between Fatimid and ISIS propaganda—in particular the conjunction between violence, coercion, and promised retribution against those who deny their authority or defy their claims—are arguably due to the necessity for both movements to justify their revolutionary statebuilding projects in their respective historical and political contexts. The Fatimids came to power in the tenth century by overthrowing various governments and principalities in North Africa that drew their legitimacy from either token or actual loyalty to the reigning Abbasid caliph in Baghdad, forging a new caliphate through the use of force backed up by alternative religious justifications. ISIS has quite evidently done exactly the same thing against the background of the nation-state system that has prevailed in the Middle East since the collapse of the Ottoman Empire. Both groups rely on themes familiar

from Islamic history, or topoi like Noah's Ark drawn from the Qur'ān and tradition, to drive a particular point home to their audience: a terrible reckoning is coming, and only the in-group—whether ISIS or the Fatimids—will be saved, along with those that not only accept their doctrines but acquiesce to their political authority.

Both movements not only project a message grounded in millenarian eschatology but use their millenarianism as a justification for violence. This is true of many movements that espouse an apocalyptic or chiliastic ideology. Not only does the claim that ISIS is fulfilling prophecy serve to legitimize their authority, but the idea that a terrible apocalyptic reckoning is coming inspires loyalty among their supporters, and infuses their communications with a sense of urgency that facilitates the transgression of boundaries and the violation of social norms.<sup>63</sup> We can recall again their blunt statement “it's us or the Flood”: compounding the psychological effects of the radical dislocation of recruits, commission of extreme acts to cement allegiance to the group, imposing severe penalties for desertion, and so forth, the projection of a sense of impending danger and imminent cataclysm—a mentality, essentially, of apocalyptic emergency—further serves as an instrument to subvert and overthrow the behavioral and cognitive norms of recruits' home communities and of Muslim society at large. Foremost here is the need to foster and justify open hostility against other Muslims, a species of violence that most forms of historical Islam repudiate—and one that seems unjustifiable on the basis of the Qur'ān, one might add.

On the other hand, given the strong sectarian impulse that characterized some of the more militant schools of Shi'ah in early and medieval Islam, these groups were more comfortable ‘othering’ Muslims who rejected the cause of ‘Alī and his family as unbelievers. For its part, the Fatimid propaganda text refers to such rejecters and the regimes that they putatively support as idolaters, hypocrites, and apostates—all terms that associate Sunnis with categories of people whom the Qur'ān and Islamic tradition generally identify not only as enemies of the faith but as legitimate targets of violence. One appellation for Sunnis in the text is especially noteworthy, namely “the calf worshippers of our community.” In one

exceptional passage, the text uses the figure of the Israelites' idolatrous worship of the Golden Calf as a metaphor for those whose loyalties are misplaced, following *imāms* who have abandoned the cause of the Ahl al-Bayt instead of supporting them.

The qur'ānic as well as the biblical accounts of the Calf episode depict the death of those who went astray worshipping it, albeit in different ways. In Exodus 32:25-29, Moses rallies the tribe of the Levites to go through the camp and pacify the idolaters in a mass bloodletting. In the Qur'ān, the Israelites seem to collectively recognize their guilt, and Moses commands them to kill themselves to make things right with God. The verse depicting this in Sūrat al-Baqarah has been interpreted in different ways, though the dominant strand in early exegesis at least was that the key phrase, *fa'qtulū anfuskakum* (literally "kill yourselves"), means "kill *each other*," and so Moses was enjoining the Israelites to engage in open combat, in which the innocent would overcome and slay the guilty.<sup>64</sup>

Evoking this image of the righteous Israelites purging the community of idolaters in one of its most transparently chiliastic passages, our Fatimid text proclaims that while repentance may formerly have been an option for those who did not cleave to the correct *imāms*, now with the coming of the Mahdī, the "gates of repentance" are shut tight for the "calf worshippers":

While in the time before the emergence of the Mahdī, the community of the Prophet had to forego killing, when the caliph al-Mahdī emerged, the gates of repentance were shut tight for the Calf worshippers from this community—just as they were shut tight for all those who did not believe before the rising of the sun in the west...<sup>65</sup>

The Fatimid text's reference to the slaughter of the Calf worshippers exploits this qur'ānic portrayal of the purging of a sinning, deviant portion of the prophetic community by those who follow the path of its true leaders, dutifully rejecting the temptation to turn aside and cleave to false idols instead. The sinister implication is that such a bloodletting is

imminent for the Calf worshippers of the present day, those who reject the *imāms* of the family of ‘Alī and follow idolatrous leaders instead, now that “the rising of the sun in the west” (the advent of the Mahdī) has taken place.

It is worth noting that Sunni exegetes have been extremely reluctant to read the Sūrah 2 story in such a way. Although early exegetes recognized the qur’ānic injunction to “slay yourselves” as Moses’ command to his loyal followers to purge the idolaters from the community, already by the tenth century, Sunni exegetes appear to have disliked the sectarian implications of this interpretation, and focused instead on readings that saw the killing as a collective atonement—the whole community being punished for the crime of the Calf, guilty and innocent alike—or even insisted that the ‘killing’ referred to in Q 2:54 is figurative.<sup>66</sup> But for a sectarian movement like the Fatimids, the story is naturally read as advocating a violent purge of deviant transgressors from the community.

As for the Fatimids, so too for ISIS: apocalypticism justifies and encourages radical acts of violence, enabling the remaking of society, the redrawing of boundaries, and redefinition of the entire ethos of the community. With the apocalyptic final struggle impending, the division between sinners and saved becomes an all-encompassing concern; there is no in-between. Thus, a more recent issue of *Dabiq*, released in the aftermath of the *Charlie Hebdo* attacks in Paris, castigates Muslims who apologized for the killings or expressed solidarity with the victims. This is discussed under the rubric “Extinction of the Grayzone.” The “gray-zone” is exactly what it sounds like—that intermediate area where ISIS locates Muslims who are not in solidarity with them but rather criticize them and thus side with unbelievers—making them, essentially, infidels although they may purport to be Muslims.<sup>67</sup>

Those dwelling in the grayzone are, in the eyes of ISIS’ spokesmen, apostates, hypocrites, infidels, and so forth, and so unambiguously merit death for their hypocrisy and disbelief. This “gray movement,” the Islam of the “grayish,” has existed since the time of the Prophet, but must be eliminated because Islam in their view is intrinsically about drawing a



sharp distinction between truth and falsehood, with no room in the middle.<sup>68</sup> ISIS' position here confirms the idea that millenarianism, especially millenarian violence, aims to remake the world as it is into something radically new. This becomes abundantly clear when we recognize the reconfiguration of society, the undoing of assimilation and liberalism and diversity, that ISIS aims to achieve in the countdown to the Hour, the clock having started with their proclamation of Abū Bakr al-Bagh-dādī's election by the Islamic State Shura Council in May 2010 and his assumption of the caliphal title *amīr al-mu'minīn* or Commander of the Faithful, supposedly in fulfillment of ancient prophecy.<sup>69</sup>

### Conclusion

As with the militant Shi'i groups of early and medieval Islam, so too with ISIS: notions of a saved minority and a sinning majority; an absolute distinction between the upright and the errant, the damned and the saved, with no room for a "grayzone" in between; and an imminent judgment that will destroy the moderates and their false leaders, ushering in a new era—all of these themes, alongside an embrace of truly spectacular violence, the fostering of a state of *ultrafitnah*, a war of all against all in the Muslim community—all of these serve to support the creation of a new state, grounded in arguments based on the traditional sources of Qur'ān and *ḥadīth* read through a conspicuously sectarian lens, in the service of a new, militant, perfectionist order that eagerly anticipates the coming of the apocalypse.<sup>70</sup>

To reiterate a point we made earlier, the ideology of ISIS is not crypto-Shi'ism. The purpose of this comparative exercise has not been to assert some direct line of influence from the Fatimids to their movement, or imply that ISIS is a Sunni recurrence of the militant Shi'ism that troubled the political, social, and religious order of the *dār al-Islām* a thousand years ago. The reduction of all varieties of radicalism to a single essence is clearly historically problematic. This reductionism has recently been manifest in ill-considered attempts to compare ISIS to the 'Assassins,' the aforementioned Nizari Isma'ili sect that conducted guerilla

warfare (including targeted political killings, thus giving a name to this phenomenon that persists today) against Sunni authorities in the eleventh and twelfth centuries. Happily, these careless comparisons have been energetically and thoughtfully refuted quite publicly, particularly by Farhad Daftary, perhaps the preeminent living scholar of the Isma'ili tradition.<sup>71</sup> To align ISIS and the Nizaris based solely on a stereotyped conception of 'Islamic terrorism' does a clear disservice to the complexities of the historical realities involved. While it is debatable whether ISIS merits anything but the most strident condemnation, the Nizaris at least have tended to be misapprehended and caricatured by Western observers since the Middle Ages.

At the same time, as our treatment here has hopefully shown, careful examination of the textual evidence points to specific points of similarity between the rhetoric employed by the Fatimids and ISIS as examples of a recurring tendency within historical Muslim communities that incline toward extreme sectarianism—that is, the resemblance is structural, possibly (for lack of a better word) sociological. Some of the parallels are admittedly deep-rooted and likely stem from centuries-old historical interactions and processes of symbiosis between Sunnis and Shi'ah. For example, the Sunni prophecy of twelve righteous caliphs who will rule in the age before the coming of the Mahdī (with ISIS claiming that Abū Bakr al-Baghdādī is the first of them) is clearly an appropriation of the Shi'i tradition of enumerating twelve Alid *imāms*. Other parallels are clearly due to the common vocabulary and images found in *fitan* traditions in Islam, upon which both Sunnis and Shi'ah alike draw; thus, ISIS propaganda sometimes asserts that “the sun of jihad” has risen; the similarity to the Fatimid invocation of the image of “the rising of the sun in the west” to describe the establishment of their dominion in the Maghrib may be due to the popularity of the *ṭulū' al-shams* prophecy in *fitan* sources, though it is also possibly due to simple coincidence.<sup>72</sup>

Moreover, at least some of the resemblances between ISIS' rhetoric and claims and those we more readily associate with militant Shi'ism might be attributed to the diffuse influence of certain currents in contemporary Twelver Shi'ism in the Iraqī milieu. They may even be attributable

to the personal background and experience of ISIS personnel. For example, as McCants notes, Abū Bakr al-Baghdādī grew up in a lower middle-class family in Samarra, “steeped in the mythology and ideas of Twelver Shi’ism”; he has even claimed descent from the Tenth Imām, ‘Alī al-Hādī.<sup>73</sup> Given the pervasive presence of Twelver Shi’ism in contemporary Iraq, for Iraqi Sunnis, opposition to Shi’ah by no means precludes acculturation to Shi’i ideas and traditions. More generally, the distinctive fusion of millenarianism and insurgency that has given ISIS its bellicose bite could readily have been communicated from Shi’i militias and preachers, through propaganda, sermons, and the like, to Zarqawī, Abū Bakr al-Baghdādī, and other AQI and ISIS operatives and ideologues.<sup>74</sup> Overall, the discursive parallelisms between Sunni and Shi’i groups has often been most acute when communities live in close proximity to one another or have even been socially integrated to some degree, as has often been the case in Iraq’s history.

However, all that said, our main goal here has been to show that minority and marginal sectarian formations in Islam have often relied on particular types of rhetoric, a symbolic language characteristic of sectarianism, in order to justify their positions. This is especially true of any Muslim group that seeks to articulate a religiously grounded argument sanctioning violence against their fellow Muslims. A logical fallacy commonly found in media discussions of Islam is the tendency to absolutize it as essentially violent or essentially peaceful; not only are religions as abstract concepts incapable of being violent or peaceable, but even when we speak of Muslims as individuals and communities possessing full human agency, to attempt to characterize all Muslims as having one or another personal quality, political orientation, or moral disposition is of course ludicrous. Rather, as is the case with all religions, the textual and traditional sources of Islam offer rich resources for believers to articulate diverse positions. Some of those positions have been more typical and deemed normative by consensus than others, to be sure; and judged by the standard established by both historical and majoritarian forms of Islam, there is no question that both the early Fatimids and ISIS—as extreme sectarian formations—are aberrant. Nevertheless, we must

recognize that the tradition does provide a symbolic language to those who seek a pretext for tightening the definition of who the real members of the community are and fostering violence against those within the community who disagree.<sup>75</sup> The coincidences in symbols, rhetoric, and ideology between the Fatimids and ISIS we have discussed here clearly demonstrate this.

## Notes

All digital content cited in this article was last accessed via the URLs provided in the notes below on October 21, 2020.

1. In preparing this article for publication, I have profited considerably from the comments of Ken Garden, Will McCants, and Stephen Shoemaker, as well as from Ken's generosity in responding to the original paper on which this article is based both publicly and now in writing as well. I also thank the anonymous peer reviewers for their helpful suggestions.

A number of very thorough scholarly and journalistic investigations of the ISIS phenomenon have been published to date. Here, I will refer frequently to Jessica Stern and J. M. Berger, *ISIS: The State of Terror* (New York: Ecco, 2015) and William McCants, *The ISIS Apocalypse: The History, Strategy, and Doomsday Vision of the Islamic State* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2015).

2. Islamist insurgencies have of course managed to overthrow regimes and seize power before. Further, in the case of Iran, an Islamist faction co-opted a popular revolution and founded a theocratic state with significant investment in sponsoring terrorism. But in the case of ISIS, the insurgent movement became the regime controlling a new territorial state carved out of portions of older states in decline, imposing itself on the citizens of the territories it has come to control without significant participation or support from the majority of them.

3. On ISIS' declaration of the caliphate of Abū Bakr al-Baghdādī, see Richard Bulliet, "It's Good to Be the Caliph," *Politico*, July 7, 2014 (<https://www.politico.com/magazine/story/2014/07/its-good-to-be-the-caliph-108630>) and Malise Ruthven, "Lure of the Caliphate," *New York Review of Books*, February 28, 2015.

4. On the legacy of Sykes-Picot and the problematics of the modern nation-state system in the Middle East, see Yezid Sayigh, "Reconstructed Reality," *Qantara.de*, March 21, 2016 (<https://en.qantara.de/content/the-crisis-of-the-arab-nation-state-reconstructed-reality>).

5. The Jazīra has been politically unified in the past, under both pre-Islamic and Islamic regimes, and arguably, attempts to dismember it are innately unstable, while economic and strategic advantage accrues to regimes that manage to unify it. Khodadad Rezakhani has conjectured that the Sasanians' loss of control over its western, Mesopotamian territory in the wake of the Arab invasions was due primarily to the regime's inability to exploit this region's economic potential, which was fully realized with its reunification under Islamic rule: see "The Arab Conquests and Sasanian Iran (Part 2): Islam in a Sasanian Context" (<http://www.mizanproject.org/the-arab-conquests-and-sasanian-iran-part-2/>). The Jazīra was the heartland of the Zengid emirate based in Mosul; significantly, the Zengids were one of the Muslim powers that battled and contributed to the eventual defeat of the Latin Crusader states. Abū Muṣ'ab al-Zarqawī, head of Al-Qa'idah in Iraq (AQI) who led brutal terror campaigns there from 2004 to 2006 and has been seen as one of the founders of ISIS, idolized Nūr al-Dīn Zengī, the founder of the emirate (McCants, *The ISIS Apocalypse*, 8–9).

6. One of the most notorious examples of ISIS' willingness to openly engage in extreme acts of brutality was the January 2015 execution of captured Jordanian pilot Mu'ath al-Kasasbeh by burning; although it was widely denounced as un-Islamic, as Andrew Marsham has recently shown, there are significant pre-modern precedents for this form of execution by Muslim authorities, particularly in the early caliphal period, at which time it was occasionally used as a mode of execution for rebels in particular ("Attitudes to the Use of Fire in Executions in Late Antiquity and Early Islam: The Burning of Heretics and Rebels in Late Umayyad Iraq," in Robert Gleave and István Kristó-Nagy, *Violence in Islamic Thought from the Qur'ān to the Mongols* [Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2015], 106–127).

7. For a survey of classical traditions, see David Cook, *Studies in Muslim Apocalyptic* (Studies in Late Antiquity and Early Islam 21; Princeton, NJ: Darwin Press, 2002) and for the contemporary revival of apocalyptic anxieties and enthusiasms, see David Cook, *Contemporary Muslim Apocalyptic Literature* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2005) and Jean-

Pierre Filiu, *L'Apocalypse dans Islam* (Paris: Fayard, 2008), published in English as *Apocalypse in Islam* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2011). Scholars have generally been slow to recognize the significance of apocalypticism in contemporary jihadist movements despite the work of Cook and Filiu; in his 2011 review of the English translation of Filiu's book, Charles Cameron presciently warned that scholars and policy-makers needed to take the rising tide of apocalyptic enthusiasm in the jihadist fringe seriously ("Hitting the Blind-Spot: A Review of Jean-Pierre Filiu's *Apocalypse in Islam*," *Jihadology*, January 24, 2011 [<https://jihadology.net/2011/01/24/guest-post-hitting-the-blind-spot-a-review-of-jean-pierre-filius-apocalypse-in-islam/>]).

8. A reliable reconstruction of early Fatimid history has proven elusive. The background of the movement is intrinsically obscure because of its origins as a clandestine organization; even the genealogy of 'Abd Allāh al-Mahdī and other early Fatimid caliph-*imāms* remains conjectural because the dynasty's spokesmen represented their links to earlier *imāms* such as Muḥammad b. Ismā'īl (d. 813) differently at different times. For recent accounts, see Michael Brett, *The Rise of the Fatimids: The World of the Mediterranean & the Middle East in the Tenth Century C.E.* (Leiden: Brill, 2001); Farhad Daftary, *The Ismā'īlīs: Their History and Doctrines* (2nd ed.; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 126 ff.; and Paul Walker, "The Ismā'īlī Da'wa and the Fāṭimid Caliphate," in Carl F. Petry (ed.), *The Cambridge History of Egypt, Vol. I: Islamic Egypt, 640–1517* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 120–150. The late tenth-century account of al-Qāḍī al-Nu'mān, *Iftitāḥ al-da'wah*, is available in English translation in Hamid Haji (trans.), *Founding the Fatimid State: The Rise of an Early Islamic Empire* (The Institute of Ismaili Studies Ismaili Texts and Translations Series 6; London: I. B. Tauris, 2006).

9. Such millenarian claims were not unusual in themselves; it is widely recognized that the Abbasids had made similar claims in their campaign to overthrow the Umayyads. See the classic treatment of Moshe Sharon, *Black Banners from the East. The Establishment of the 'Abbāsid State: Incubation of a Revolt* (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 1983) and the more recent work of Hayrettin Yücesoy, *Messianic Beliefs and Imperial Politics in Medieval*

*Islam: The ‘Abbāsīd Caliphate in the Ninth Century* (Columbia, SC: University of South Carolina Press, 2009). Similarly, another branch of the Ismā‘īlīs, the Nizaris of Alamut, pursued a parallel trajectory when their *imām* proclaimed the *qiyāmah* or resurrection as a new age of re-alized eschatology in which the faithful lived in a redeemed state free of the constraints of shari’ah. On this, see the classic treatment of Marshall G. S. Hodgson, *The Order of Assassins: The Struggle of the Early Nizārī Ismā‘īlīs Against the Islamic World* (The Hague: Mouton, 1955; repr. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2005), and now Jamel A. Velji, *An Apocalyptic History of the Early Fatimid Empire* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2016), 109–122. The latter emphasizes the continuity of Nizari ideas with those of the Fatimids two centuries previous; understood in its proper context, the realized eschatology of the movement at Alamut no longer appears like an aberrant indulgence of antinomian enthusiasm. Arguably, these later irruptions of apocalyptic fervor draw on and revive a political eschatology already dominant in the Qur’ān and the prophetic period, which was itself characteristic of the late antique environment in which Islam was revealed: see Stephen J. Shoemaker, “‘The Reign of God Has Come’: Eschatology and Empire in Late Antiquity and Early Islam,” *Arabica* 61 (2014): 514–558.

10. Along with “the Day” (*al-yawm*), “the Hour” (*al-sā‘ah*) is the most common Qur’ānic term for the cataclysmic end of time and advent of the Final Judgment.

11. On this manuscript, see Michael Pregill, “Measure for Measure: Prophetic History, Qur’anic Exegesis, and Anti-Sunnī Polemic in a Fāṭimid Propaganda Work (BL Or. 8419),” *Journal of Qur’anic Studies* 16 (2014): 20–57.

12. For a concise account of Fatimid literary production in the context of the *da‘wah*, see the now-classic account of Heinz Halm, *The Fatimids and their Traditions of Learning* (London: I. B. Tauris in association with The Institute of Ismaili Studies, 1997).

13. See the definitive discussion of this in Uri Rubin, *Between Bible and Qur’ān: The Children of Israel and the Islamic Self-Image* (Studies in Late Antiquity and Early Islam 17; Princeton, NJ: Darwin Press, 1999), 168–189.

14. BL Or. 8419, 2a–b. This tradition is sometimes called the *ḥadīth*



of *juhr ḍabb* on account of the unusual image of the lizard hole it evokes here. All translations from the Arabic are the author's unless otherwise noted.

15. *Ibid.*, 1b. On the so-called *firāq* tradition, see Rubin, *Between Bible and Qurʾān*, 117–146.

16. The Sunni polemical claim linking the Shiʿah and the Jews is at least partially historically rooted in an ancient inclination towards ‘biblicizing’ among the Shiʿah themselves, but took on a life of its own in here-siographical literature. See Steven M. Wasserstrom, “‘The Šiʿis are the Jews of our Community’: An Interreligious Comparison within Sunnī Thought,” in Ilai Alon, Ithamar Gruenwald, and Itamar Singer (eds.), *Concepts of the Other in Near Eastern Religions* (Israel Oriental Studies XIV; Leiden: Brill, 1994), 297–324.

17. For other Shiʿi applications of this tradition, see Rubin, *Between Bible and Qurʾān*, 186–189. The tradition may very well have originated in anti-Shiʿi polemic but was readily reoriented by Shiʿi traditionists and authors in order to turn the tables on Sunnis.

18. BL Or. 8419, 50b–51a. The perception of an analogy between the harsh treatment meted out to the Israelites by the Egyptians and that to which the Ahl al-Bayt were subjected was no doubt encouraged by Q ʿaṣaṣ 28:3–4, which refers to Pharaoh’s making the people of the land into a party—a *shīʿah*—so as to weaken or oppress some of them.

19. *Ibid.*, 79b.

20. On *taʾwīl*, see the classic discussion of Ismail K. Poonawala, “Ismāʿīlī *Taʾwīl* of the Qurʾān,” in Andrew Rippin (ed.), *Approaches to the History of the Interpretation of the Qurʾān* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1988), 199–222. To this should be added the new treatments of David Hollenberg, *Beyond the Quran: Early Ismaʿīli Taʾwīl and the Secrets of the Prophets* (Columbia, SC: University of South Carolina Press, 2016, forthcoming) and Velji, *Apocalyptic History*, 14–21. I am very grateful to both Prof. Hollenberg and Prof. Velji for generously sharing their much-anticipated work with me prior to final publication.

21. It is specifically the handful of allusions to a transformative world event in BL Or. 8419 that mark it as likely originating in the early

Fatimid milieu: the coming of the Mahdī as the fulfillment of the prophecy of the “rising of the sun in the west” (*tulu‘ al-shams min al-maghrib/ ghar-bihā*); see Pregill, 43–47. The promotion of this millenarian imagery assisted the Fatimids in overthrowing Sunni authorities in North Africa, especially the Aghlabids, and helped them to establish their dominion as an alternative to that of the Abbasids to the east. However, the idea that the End of Days was imminent was abandoned fairly quickly after the founding of their caliphate, the fostering of apocalyptic urgency proving, as it usually does, antithetical to the fostering of sustainable institutions.

22. This is not to say that there are no other historical precedents for ISIS’ fusion of militant Sunnism and apocalypticism; another obvious parallel is the Almohad Empire, which dominated Morocco and southern Spain for a number of decades after its founding in the twelfth century, thus almost contemporary with the Fatimids. Nevertheless, as we shall see, it is the parallels between the propaganda of ISIS and the Fatimids that appear most compelling, especially their employment of certain Qur’ānic tropes.

23. On ISIS’ idealization of the Abbasid Caliphate under Hārūn al-Rashīd, see McCants, *The ISIS Apocalypse*, 131–135.

24. For succinct treatments of ISIS’ apocalyptic doctrines, see Stern and Berger, *ISIS: The State of Terror*, 219–231 and McCants, *The ISIS Apocalypse*, 99–119.

25. See Abbas Amanat, *Apocalyptic Islam and Iranian Shi’ism* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2009); Filiu, *Apocalypse in Islam*, 141–164.

26. The exception that proves the rule in this case being the movement led by Juhaymān al-‘Utaybī, which seized the Masjid al-Ḥaram in Saudi Arabia in 1979. As is increasingly recognized now due to the release of formerly classified documents, ‘Utaybī and his circle were Wahhābī dissidents who were motivated by radical millenarian beliefs.

27. This appears to be particularly due to the influence of Abū Muṣṣab al-Sūrī, a jihadist ideologue whose widely circulated treatise *A Call for Global Islamic Resistance* is a bizarre mix of tactical pragmatism and millenarian enthusiasm; see Filiu, *Apocalypse in Islam*, 186–191. David

Cook has argued in an unpublished paper that Sūrī had a significant impact on Zarqawī, head of AQI and spiritual father of ISIS, who saw his insurgent activities as fulfillments of the *fitan* prophecies Sūrī collected (“Abu Mus‘ab al-Suri and Abu Mus‘ab al-Zarqawi: The Apocalyptic Theorist and the Apocalyptic Practitioner”; I thank Prof. Cook for sharing this paper with me). Zarqawī was thus presumably the channel through whom Sūrī’s apocalyptic enthusiasms were channeled to ISIS propagandists, who have likewise presented their activities as the fulfillment of prophecy. Already in fall 2014, Michael W. S. Ryan’s analysis of the first issue of *Dabiq* recognized the importance of ISIS’ debt to Sūrī’s ideas (“Hot Issue: What Islamic State’s New Magazine Tells Us about Their Strategic Direction, Recruitment Patterns and Guerilla Doctrine,” *Jamestown Foundation Terrorism Monitor*, August 1, 2014 [<https://jamestown.org/program/hot-issue-dabiq-what-islamic-states-new-magazine-tells-us-about-their-strategic-direction-recruitment-patterns-and-guerrilla-doctrine/>]).

28. When the first phase of the IS caliphate was destroyed with the killing of its caliph, Abū ‘Umar al-Baghdādī, and its main director, Abū Ayyūb al-Maṣrī, in early 2010, scattered reports in the media noted the event as a success of US and Iraqi joint forces in suppressing what was termed a ‘doomsday cult.’ The relative insignificance of the IS movement at that stage seems to have precluded further investigation at the time. It should also be noted that outside observers can really only track the prominence of apocalyptic symbols and traditions in ISIS’ propaganda, without any means of gauging the degree of authentic conviction among either the leadership or the rank and file. As McCants and others have noted, the black banner of ISIS was at least for a brief time associated with a broadly defined ideal of Islamic popular resistance; see *The ISIS Apocalypse*, 69–71.

29. See Khalid Yahya Blankinship, *The End of the Jihād State: The Reign of Hishām Ibn ‘Abd al-Malik and the Collapse of the Umayyads* (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 1994).

30. For a convenient overview of Ibn Taymiyyah’s legitimization of jihad against the Ilkhanids, see David Cook, *Understanding Jihad* (Berkeley:

University of California press, 2005), 63–66, and on his significant impact on post-Qutbian jihadist ideology, see 106–110.

31. See V. G. Julie Rajan, *Al Qaeda's Global Crisis: The Islamic State, takfir, and the Genocide of Muslims* (London: Routledge, 2015); cf. Eli Alshech, "The Doctrinal Crisis within the Salafi-Jihadi Ranks and the Emergence of Neo-Takfirism: A Historical and Doctrinal Analysis," *Islamic Law and Society* 21 (2014): 419–452. On the historical vicissitudes of *takfir* as a marginal but at times historically significant practice in Muslim movements, see Camilla Adang et al. (eds.), *Accusations of Unbelief in Islam: A Diachronic Perspective on Takfir* (Islamic History and Civilization 123; Leiden: Brill, 2016).

32. Much debate of these issues was stimulated by Graeme Wood's piece "What ISIS Really Wants," published in the March 2015 issue of *The Atlantic*. Wood and various informants quoted in the piece sought to encourage both the general public and specialists to recognize that many of ISIS' doctrines were rooted in certain trajectories found in certain varieties of authentic historical Islam, as opposed to claims that ISIS is simply aberrant and totally unrecognizable by traditional standards. In turn, Wood was criticized for implying that ISIS is more representative of mainstream thought than they are, or worse, have a greater claim to historical authenticity than more moderate ways of thinking among Muslims—thus enabling right-wing critiques of Islam and Muslims as intrinsically violent, fanatical, etc. Wood subsequently published a summary and analysis of some of the responses to his piece: see <http://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2015/02/what-isis-really-wants-reader-response-atlantic/385710/>. To those Wood mentions here should be added three very serious academic replies: Caner K. Dagli, "The Phony Islam of ISIS," *The Atlantic*, February 27, 2015; Anver Emon, "Is ISIS Islamic? Why it Matters for the Study of Islam," *The Immanent Frame*, March 27, 2015 (<https://tif.ssrc.org/2015/03/27/is-isis-islamic-why-it-matters-for-the-study-of-islam/>); and Aaron W. Hughes, "ISIS: What's a Poor Religionist to Do?," *Marginalia/MRBlog*, March 4, 2015 (<http://marginalia.lareviewofbooks.org/mrblog-isis-whats-poor-religionist/>).

33. ISIS' tendency to alienate less radical groups, even those with

which it was previously closely affiliated, is exemplified by their falling-out with Al-Qa'idah, to whom they were formerly subordinate, and their schism with Jabhat al-Nuṣrah, their former proxies in Syria. See Stern and Berger, *ISIS: The State of Terror*, 39–50, 177–198 and McCants, *The ISIS Apocalypse*, 89–98. When the caliphate of Abū Bakr al-Baghdādī was proclaimed, the massively influential jihadist ideologue Abū Muḥammad al-Maḥdī presciently questioned “whether this caliphate will be a refuge for oppressed people and a haven for every Muslim or will become a sword hanging over the Muslims who oppose it” (quoted in McCants, *The ISIS Apocalypse*, 118–119).

34. The noun *murtadd* is not attested in the Qurʾān, but is readily derived from the verb *irtadda*, which has a very strong connotation of rejecting the truth, as in Q Muḥammad 47:25. On the other hand, the term *munāfiq* and its related forms are amply represented in the Qurʾān, where *nifāq* seems to represent the quality not simply of people who say one thing and do another, but rather profess loyalty to the Prophet and community while secretly subverting them. The tradition assigns this label to a group of individuals who were officially pledged to support Muḥammad during his time in Medina but resented and covertly opposed him.

35. ISIS’ polemic against the Safavid spread of Shi’ism in Iran is ironic, for their movement has significant things in common with that of the early Safavids, particularly the exploitation of millenarian anticipation to marshal military support for their cause; on this, see the recent treatment in Colin P. Mitchell, *The Practice of Politics in Safavid Iran: Power, Religion and Rhetoric* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2009), esp. 19–67.

36. ISIS propaganda also uses the term *rāfiḍah* or *rāfiḍīs* for Shi’ah in general. Alawite supporters of Assad in Syria are distinguished by the label “Shabbīhah,” with the regime being termed “Nuṣayri,” again as a way to assert implicitly that they are something other than Muslim, as opposed to their own supporters who are *simply* Muslim.

37. A recent issue of *Dabiq* (issue 13, Rabīʿ al-Ākhir 1437 [January-February 2016]) features two pieces on the history of the “Rāfiḍah,” mixing objective historical facts and traditional Sunni polemical tropes. The

main feature, “The Rāfidah: From Ibn Saba’ to the Dajjāl” (32–45), gives an extended history of *rafḍ* as a supposedly perennial threat to true belief in the Muslim community, rehearsing the common Sunni claim that Shi’ism both originates and culminates with Jews—beginning with the heresy of Ibn Saba’ and ending with the emergence of the Dajjāl or Antichrist, both figures being identified as Jewish. Overall, the Iranian character of Shi’ism is stressed, and the piece vacillates in a somewhat contradictory fashion between characterizing Shi’ism as an ancient heresy and emphasizing its spread as a late innovation; the latter is the specific focus of the first piece on the subject in the issue, “From the Pages of History: The Safawiyah” (10–13).

38. There is, however, an important distinction to be made between an activism that employs violence and seeks to force the social world to conform to pure, ideal Islamic standards and engaging in such discourse as a means of disciplining the self and demarcating social boundaries. On this complex question, see the discussion of Ibn Ḥanbal in Thomas Sizgorich, *Violence and Belief in Late Antiquity* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania, 2009), 231–271, esp. 263 ff. Once one group within the community begins branding another as infidels, the rhetoric tends to be contagious; thus, recently the Grand Mufti of Saudi Arabia dismissed allegations of malfeasance in the Saudi organization of the Hajj by the Khamenei regime in Iran by saying that Iranians are not truly Muslims but rather *majūs* (Zoroastrians) (“Saudi Arabia’s Top Cleric Says Iranians are ‘Not Muslims,’” BBC.com, September 6, 2016 [<https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-37287434>]). It is not difficult to imagine that casual *takfir* of this sort has become more acceptable given ISIS’ relentless recourse to such language.

39. It is virtually indisputable that the Fatimid propaganda text employs this discourse to authorize violence against other Muslims, though its *takfir* is only implicit. That is, the terms *kāfirūn* or *kuffār* seem to only be invoked in the text in reference to the infidels who opposed Abraham, Moses, or Muḥammad, not the author’s contemporaries. However, one can infer from the different descriptions of behavior deemed *kufr* here that an analogy between infidels who explicitly deny God and those Mus-

lms who reject the claims of the Ahl al-Bayt is implied. As is often the case among Muslim groups in general, Isma'ili authors exhibit a variety of attitudes toward this question. The recent discussion of De Smet shows that spokesmen like al-Kirmānī (d. c. 1021) stridently rejected the Sunni accusation that their creed constituted *kufr*, yet many Isma'ilis did not shy from characterizing both Sunnis and Shi'ah (and even other Isma'ilis) whose views they believed to be too radical to be *kuffār*. See Daniel De Smet, "Kufr et takfīr dans l'ismaélisme fatimide: Le Kitāb Tanbīh al-hādī de Ḥamīd al-Dīn al-Kirmānī," in Camilla Adang et al. (eds.), *Accusations of Unbelief in Islam*, 82–102.

40. "It's Either the Islamic State or the Flood," *Dabiq* 2 (Ramaḍān 1435 [June-July 2014]): 5–11. Nothing seems to be known about the author, who has been credited with a number of articles that have appeared in *Dabiq* over the last two years.

41. On the qur'ānic depiction of Noah and its relationship to biblical and postbiblical traditions, see William M. Brinner, "Noah," in Jane Dammen McAuliffe (ed.), *Encyclopaedia of the Qur'ān* (6 vols.; Leiden: Brill, 2001–2006), 3, 539–544.

42. This verse underwent a significant shift in interpretation over the course of several centuries, its more literal meaning as prohibiting conversion by the sword gradually eroding in favor of a more spiritualized exegesis, namely as a reference to the question of predestination. Nevertheless, its force as a testimony that disbelief had to be tolerated rather than forcibly eradicated never went away completely. See Patricia Crone, "No Compulsion in Religion: Q. 2:256 in Medieval and Modern Interpretation," in Mohammed Ali Amir-Moezzi, Meir M. Bar-Asher, and Simon Hopkins (eds.), *Le shī'isme imāmīte quarante ans après: Hommage à Etan Kohlberg* (Bibliothèque de l'École des Hautes Etudes, Sciences Religieuses 137; Turnhout: Brepols, 2009), 131–178, repr. in Patricia Crone, *The Qur'ānic Pagans and Related Matters: Collected Studies in Three Volumes, Volume 1*, ed. Hanna Siurua (3 vols.; Islamic History and Civilization, Studies and Texts 129; Leiden: Brill, 2015), 351–409. For a classic example of the theological implications of the opposite case, namely coercion to *disbelief* (or at least prevention of attestation of belief), see Eric Ormsby, "The Faith of Pha-

raoh: A Disputed Question in Islamic Theology,” in Todd Lawson (ed.), *Reason and Inspiration in Islam: Theology, Philosophy and Mysticism in Muslim Thought. Essays in Honour of Hermann Landolt* (London: I. B. Tauris in association with the Institute of Ismaili Studies, 2005), 471–489.

43. Cf., e.g., Q Nūḥ 71:25.

44. The pursuit of *da‘wah* according to the proper “method” is part of a broader concern with the path or methodology for establishing the caliphate and summoning Muslims to support it evinced in ISIS propaganda materials. This is because the *ḥadīth* the movement commonly cites as foretelling the restoration of the caliphate asserts that this will transpire “according to the prophetic method” (*al-khilāfah ‘alā manḥāj al-nubuwwah*); it is attested in a number of major collections, including those of al-Tirmidhī and Ibn Ḥanbal (ironically, the *ḥadīth* is typically related from the Prophet by Ḥudhayfah b. al-Yamān, understood by the Shi‘ah to have been one of the major partisans of ‘Alī and his family among the Companions). ISIS no doubt interprets the “prophetic method” as meaning pursuit of the caliphate in accordance with the *sunnah* of the Prophet Muḥammad—or, as imagined here, the *sunnah* of other prophets such as Noah. If the Qur’ān establishes that coercion was the *manḥāj* used by Noah, this validates their own use of coercive tactics. Regarding more recent precedents, ISIS is not shy about asserting its preference for the *manḥāj* of Zarqawī regarding the question of dealing with the Shi‘ah, as opposed to the tolerant *manḥāj* adopted by such bastions of liberalism as the Taliban and Al-Qa’idah; see “The Rāfidah,” 39–42.

45. As explained in *Dabiq* 2: “Furthermore, if anyone in the time of Nūḥ (*‘alayhis-salām*) called to the principle of free choice for the people of Nūḥ, stating that Nūḥ is a caller to the true path but has no right to force people to follow his *da‘wah*, such an individual would be considered a disbeliever in the *da‘wah* of the Prophet Nūḥ even if he held it to be the truth in and of itself” (“It’s Either the Islamic State or the Flood,” 9).

46. Ibid.

47. Ibid.

48. See discussion in Rubin, *Between Bible and Qur’ān*, 95–97.

49. See the exhaustive treatment of the subject by Raya Shani,



“Noah’s Ark and the Ship of Faith in Persian Painting from the Fourteenth to the Sixteenth Centuries,” *Jerusalem Studies in Arabic and Islam* 27 (2002): 127–203.

50. A similar elitism marks Gnostic interpretations of the biblical story, though these more commonly tend to emphasize the Flood as the work of a hostile Demiurge that destroyed the corrupting works of the flesh on earth, rather than the Ark as a symbol of providential protection for those who cleave to the truth. See Sergei Minov, “Noah and the Flood in Gnosticism,” in M. E. Stone et al. (eds.), *Noah and His Books* (Judaism and Its Literature 28; Atlanta: SBL Press, 2010), 215–236.

51. BL Or. 8419, 32a. The early Safavids were likewise prone to invoke biblical images in combination with militant rhetoric, and so they too made us of this *ḥadīth* to urge their followers to cleave to them faithfully as the sole refuge from turmoil and strife. See Mitchell, *Practice of Politics*, 30–46.

52. The duty of Muslims to emigrate to fight for or otherwise support ISIS is a recurring theme in their doctrine and propaganda; it was the main feature of *Dabiq* 3 (Shawwāl 1435 [July–August 2014]). The call to Muslims to commit to *hijrah* to support the cause of revival, in emulation of the emigration of the Prophet and his Companions from Mecca to Medina, has been a staple of jihadist rhetoric for decades, and was particularly prominent in the propaganda of Al-Qa’idah. It was most likely first popularized in the writings of the Egyptian Shukrī Muṣṭafā, whose organization Jama‘at al-Muslimīn emerged as part of the larger Islamist resistance to the Sadat regime in the 1970s; their emphasis on separating from Egyptian society, which they considered to be in a state of total apostasy, earned the group the derogatory name *Takfir wa’l-Hijrah*. See Gilles Kepel, *Muslim Extremism in Egypt: The Prophet and Pharaoh* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985), 73–78. On the Isma’ili call to *hijrah* in support of their *imāms*, see Velji, *Apocalyptic History*, 36–38.

53. Notably, at least in the issue of *Dabiq* upon which we have focused here, ISIS’ propagandistic use of the motif of the flood evokes Shi’i parallels much more than it does other instances of flood imagery invoked in apocalyptic traditions of a less overtly sectarian nature. For example,

see Cook's concise discussion of the so-called "tradition of Thawban," mentioned in some pro-Al-Qa'idah writings of the 1990s and 2000s: see *Contemporary Muslim Apocalyptic Literature*, 10–11, 182–183.

54. This second feature is not specifically credited to an author; one supposes it is also the work of 'Abū 'Amr.'

55. There are a number of widely disseminated *ḥadīth* reports about the episode, some of which are found in major canonical sources. Some of the early accounts lack any reference to Muḥammad's family at all; for example, Ibn Ishāq's account focuses on the revelation of some eighty verses from Sūrah 3 (Āl 'Imrān, which deals at great length with Jesus and Mary) to the Prophet in response to the challenge of the Najrānī delegates, but does not mention his family as witnesses (*The Life of Muhammad: A Translation of Ishāq's* [sic] *Sīrat Rasūl Allāh*, trans. A. Guillaume [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1955], 270–277). Compare the fully "Shi'ified" version related in Shaykh al-Mufīd: *Kitāb al-Irshād: The Book of Guidance into the Lives of the Twelve Imams*, trans. I. K. A. Howard (Qom: Ansariyan Publications, 2007), 116–119.

56. This incident is thus closely related to that of the *kisā'* or mantle, which establishes 'Alī, Fāṭimah, and their sons as the "People of the House" referred to in Q Aḥzāb 33:33. For convenient discussions of the relationship between these two events in the context of larger questions about authority and succession, see Wilferd Madelung, *The Succession to Muḥammad: A Study of the Early Caliphate* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 14–16 and Oliver Leaman, *Controversies in Contemporary Islam* (London: Routledge, 2013), 8–12; for discussion of the differences in interpretation of the tradition between moderate and more radical branches of the Shi'ah, see Matti Moosa, *Extremist Shiites: The Ghulat Sects*, esp. 77–87.

57. Oddly given its vociferous advocacy for the claims of the Ahl al-Bayt on the one hand and its vehement criticism of Jews and Christians on the other, the episode of the *mubāhalah* does not receive as much attention in the Fatimid text as one might expect. In one passage, Q 3:61 is quoted and the reference to "your sons" explained as Ḥasan and Ḥusayn (who were actually Muḥammad's grandsons), on the basis of the *mubāhalah* event (BL Or. 8419, 47b). In several passages the importance of 'Alī,

Fāṭimah, Ḥasan, and Ḥusayn as the “People of the House” or “People of the Cloak” is stressed, but overall it seems to be assumed here that, as with other key aspects of traditional Shi’i argument for the authority of the Alid *imāms*, the audience is familiar with the basic issues and so the episodes are not recounted at length.

58. On the fractious (and fratricidal) history between ISIS and Jabhat al-Nuṣrah, see McCants, *The ISIS Apocalypse*, 85–98.

59. Over the last year, the Nuṣrah leadership has continued to seek support for its campaign against the Assad regime in Syria by distancing itself from ISIS and its atrocities, and particularly by emphasizing significant differences between their ideology and that of ISIS—for example by reiterating the illegitimacy of targeting civilians. In other ways, however, they remain barely distinguishable from ISIS, mistreating religious minorities and forcibly imposing “Islamic” codes of dress and modesty in territory they control. See Daveed Gartenstein-Ross and Aymenn Jawad al-Tamimi, “Druze Clues,” *Foreign Affairs*, October 5, 2015 (<https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/syria/2015-10-05/druze-clues>). Famously, a jihadist fighting for Nuṣrah in Syria appeared in a video urging righteous Muslims in the area to resist ISIS as *khawārij* after their killing of civilians in Aleppo in August 2015; this video was very widely circulated on the Internet via social media and received significant exposure in Western countries due to the fact that the spokesman in the video is Abū Baṣīr al-Briṭānī, a young English convert. Many other Muslim groups and spokesmen have jumped on the bandwagon of branding ISIS as *khawārij* as a gesture marking their behavior as wholly unacceptable and un-Islamic. A persuasive argument to this effect grounded in the *ḥadīth* has been made repeatedly by Yasir Qadhi, who notably has been denounced in *Dabiq* and effectively marked for death by ISIS.

60. “The Flood of Mubāhalah,” *Dabiq* 2 (Ramaḍān 1435 [June-July 2014]): 20–30; see especially 20–22 on the justifications for engaging in *mubāhalah*. The roster of scholars who invoked God’s curse against rivals provided here is an impressive one, including Ibn ‘Abbās, al-Awzā’ī, Ibn Taymiyyah, Ibn Qayyim al-Jawziyyah, Ibn Ḥajar al-Asqalānī, and Ibn ‘Abd al-Wahhāb. Admittedly it is not only Sunnis who have engaged in this

practice historically, nor only ISIS that has done it in modern times; Mīrzā Ghulām Aḥmad, founder of the Ahmadi sect, summoned both Hindu and Christian challengers to *mubāhalah*; see Simon Ross Valentine, *Islam and the Ahmadiyya Jama'at: History, Belief, Practice* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2008), 47–51.

61. Moreover, since the first and most famous *mubāhalah* was invoked by Muḥammad against Christians, the implicit dynamic that anyone invoking the curse against rivals establishes is that they are following the *sunnah* of the Prophet while their opponents are not only in error but actually the equivalent of infidels. Conversely, Nuṣrah lose the rhetorical high ground here, for while no one wants to be called a Khārijite, Sunnis at least tend to be rather ambivalent about the political conflict that spawned this sect. Imitating the actions of the Prophet himself in a confrontation in which he was indisputably in the right grants far more prestige than imitating his cousin and son-in-law ‘Alī in the internecine conflict of the First Fitnah.

62. See the trenchant analysis of jihadist poetry by Robyn Creswell and Bernard Haykel, “Battle Lines,” *The New Yorker*, June 8–15, 2015, emphasizing the idealized past that fills the landscape of the ISIS *imagin-aire*: “The culture of jihad is a culture of romance. It promises adventure and asserts that the codes of medieval heroism and chivalry are still relevant...” The poetry composed by ISIS supporters is littered with deliberate anachronisms, such as the reference to jihadist enclaves as *ribāṭs*, a term that traditionally refers to a fortress on the border of Islamic territory from which *ghāzīs*, warriors for the faith, would sally forth to raid against their enemies.

63. Fostering loyalty among recruits, especially children, is also achieved through methods typically employed by insurgent and terrorist organizations such as desensitization to violence and forced complicity in atrocity, a point emphasized by Stern and Berger, *ISIS: The State of Terror*, 210–215. On the waning impact of ISIS broadcasts of video atrocity despite repeated escalations, see J. M. Berger’s recent commentary, “The Decapitation Will Not Be Televised,” *Foreign Policy*, July 3, 2016 (<https://foreignpolicy.com/2016/07/03/isis-roller-ball-hunger-games-cinema/>).

64. Q 2:54. See my discussion of the politically-charged exegesis of this qurʾānic topos in “‘Turn in Repentance to your Creator, then Slay Yourselves’: The Levitical Election, Atonement, and Secession in Early and Classical Islamic Exegesis,” *Comparative Islamic Studies* 6:1–2 (2010): 101–150.

65. BL Or. 8419, 30b–31a.

66. Pregill, “Turn in Repentance,” 142 ff.

67. “Extinction of the Grayzone,” *Dabiq* 7 (Rabīʿ al-Ākhir 1436 [January-February 2015]): 54–66.

68. On the polarizing effect created by ISIS and its terror campaigns in Europe in particular, see Karim El-Gawhary, “No More Shades of Grey,” *Qantara.de*, March 28, 2016 (<https://en.qantara.de/content/is-attacks-in-brussels-no-more-shades-of-grey>). Notably, a team of Russian scholars published a book in fall 2015 recommending that the Russian state adopt a conciliatory policy of promoting national unity through emphasizing the historic ties between Orthodoxy and Islam as a strategy for achieving security; part of the proposed strategy rests upon state support for traditional expressions of Islam while openly condemning ISIS as an aberration. See Paul Goble, “New Russian Book Says Only Ideological Approach Can Defeat Islamic State,” *Jamestown Foundation Eurasia Daily Monitor*, October 21, 2015 (<https://jamestown.org/program/new-russian-book-says-only-ideological-approach-can-defeat-islamic-state-2/>).

69. It has often been observed that the apocalyptic mentality aims at refashioning the world, but that this impulse is also radically restorative as well—the new order achieved at the culmination of history in some way recapitulating, mirroring, or embodying the pristine order that stood at the beginning of things. This atavism is manifest not only in ISIS’ insistent aping of supposed prophetic precedent—a kind of hyper-Sunnism that defies all aspects of what Sunnism has historically represented—but in symbolic gestures like the use of Muḥammad’s seal on their flag and the adoption of the regnal name Abū Bakr by Ibrāhīm ʿAwwād Ibrāhīm al-Badrī. This is obviously meant to hearken back to Abū Bakr al-Ṣiddīq (r. 642–644), Muḥammad’s father-in-law and the first caliph of the community.

70. But not too soon; as McCants notes, by emphasizing the return of *khilāfah* as the fulfillment of prophecy, ISIS quietly distracts its followers from the question of when the Mahdī will appear, thus insulating themselves from disconfirmation and disappointment (*The ISIS Apocalypse*, 142–144).

71. See Farhad Daftary, “Islamic State and the Assassins: Reviving Fanciful Tales of the Medieval Orient,” *The Conversation*, February 26, 2016 (<https://theconversation.com/islamic-state-and-the-assassins-reviving-fanciful-tales-of-the-medieval-orient-53873>). The use of “Assassins” as a simple shorthand for any Muslim group that engages in extreme acts is unfortunately encouraged by sensationalistic and misleading depictions of that group in both fiction and nonfiction.

72. Shi’i sources more broadly speak of the moment of millenarian deliverance of the faithful as the “rising” of the Mahdī or the Qā’im (another term for the Mahdī or Imām of the End Times).

73. See the biographical notes on al-Baghdādī in McCants, *The ISIS Apocalypse*, 73–79.

74. In his chapter on contemporary Shi’ism, Filiu notes the rapid communication of apocalyptic ideas across Shi’i communities in Iraq, Iran, and Lebanon over the last ten years, especially intensifying from 2005 to 2006 (*Apocalypse in Islam*, 141–164). There is no reason we should suppose that Sunni communities in the same areas, living in close proximity to Shi’i communities, consuming the same media and participating in the same political and social discourse, would not be affected by this trend as well.

75. Thus, it is particularly important to recognize that there is no neutral, unmotivated reading of the normative sources in Islam or any other religious tradition; every reading reflects a combination of inherited tradition and individual and communal inclination. Over the centuries, Twelver Shi’ah have generally rejected a reading of the Qur’ān that authorizes violence against other Muslims in favor of a more depoliticized hermeneutic. Notably, under particular historical and cultural circumstances, a highly politicized reading of the Qur’ān came to be popularized again by Iranian Shi’ah; in the later twentieth century, the

Qurʾān was increasingly understood to be a revolutionary document, emphasizing martyrdom as a politically necessary creed and enabling the articulation of an ideology that contributed to the Iranian Revolution in 1979 (or at least justified a theocratic cooptation of a popular revolt). See the systematic study of Najibullah Lafraie, *Revolutionary Ideology and Islamic Militancy: The Iranian Revolution and Interpretations of the Quran* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2009).

## Response to Michael Pregill, “ISIS, Eschatology, and Exegesis”

Kenneth Garden

Michael Pregill’s approach here is a fruitful alternative to the question: “How Islamic is ISIS?” In its place he asks: “What kind of Muslims make up ISIS? Whom in Islamic history do they most resemble in their rhetoric and use of scripture, and what does this tell us about their position, their appeal, and—perhaps—their prospects?”

The parallel he has found, the Isma’ili Shi’ite Fatimid dynasty of the tenth to twelfth centuries, is a striking one. ISIS is a fanatically sectarian Sunni movement, and it is ironic that the group’s unusual interpretation of the episode of Noah’s Ark in its online magazine *Dabiq* was anticipated by a Shi’ite dynasty. But the point here is not that this makes ISIS somehow unconsciously Shi’ite. Rather it suggests that ISIS, like the Fatimids, is trying to legitimate itself and the gruesome violence it perpetrates to a Muslim community that largely rejects its message. The Fatimids ruled over North Africa and the Levant from Egypt. Their Muslim subjects, even in the capital city they founded, Cairo, remained Sunni. ISIS likewise has proclaimed a new caliphate and demands recognition from a worldwide Muslim community that has roundly rejected its call. Both groups resort to scriptural rhetoric to justify their earthly failure to win a mass following and threaten recalcitrant fellow Muslims.

As Pregill explains, the Noah of the Qur’ān called to his community over and over to abandon its sinful ways, to no avail. Of course his sinful neighbors would be punished in the afterlife for their rejection, but God



and his prophet were not content with that. Rather, they had to be threatened with an earthly punishment to compel earthly compliance. The proselytizing of the Fatimids among their Sunni subjects fell on deaf ears, just as ISIS finds most all of the world's Muslims content to inhabit what it has defined as the "grayzone" of Islamic practice that does not recognize the group's religious and political authority. For these deniers, the flood looms.

Of course, the ISIS leadership takes their interpretation of the Noah story in a different direction; for them, ISIS itself is the flood. Invoking the incident of the *mubāhalah*, as the Fatimids did as well, though to a different end, ISIS links it to the Noah narrative, referring to "the Flood of the Mubāhalah."<sup>1</sup> Much as Muḥammad frightened his opponents into backing down in a religious dispute by invoking God's curses on whichever party was in the wrong, ISIS threatens its own opponents with destruction—at its hands—if they continue to oppose the group. ISIS is the messenger and the punishment in one, even as the group also claims to be the harbinger of a coming apocalypse.

These are Islamic arguments, but not because they objectively represent "true" Islamic doctrine as plainly stated in scripture. As Pregill points out, ISIS seeks to legitimate itself scripturally by invoking qur'ānic passages or *ḥadīth* that proclaim the sanctity of the pious minority, such as the *ḥadīth* of the stranger, which states that "Islam began as a stranger and will return to being a stranger as it began, so blessed be the strangers," or the *ḥadīth* of the "saved sect," in which the Prophet says that his community will be divided into seventy (or seventy-two) sects, of which all but one will end up in hellfire.<sup>2</sup>

But Islamic scripture can be invoked to make precisely the opposite case by invoking *ḥadīth* such as "If you see a dispute, side with the majority," or "my community will never agree upon an error."<sup>3</sup> What makes a group (very) Islamic, as Graeme Wood says of ISIS, is not its doctrine or the amount of scripture it cites, but rather its ability to present its doctrine in a language that links it to Islamic scripture and tradition in a way that other Muslims feel obliged to engage with it. This is not to say that doing so will win a majority following; a wide-ranging consensus

could still reject and refute ISIS' doctrine, as indeed it has. The point is that other Muslims feel addressed in a way they don't by moral claims that invoke the life of the Buddha or the letters of Paul.

Pregill's exercise here points to a typology of Islamic self-representation and legitimation. What kind of Muslims avail themselves of the sorts of interpretations of the particular texts that ISIS evokes? Minority groups resigned to the rejection of their understanding of Islam by the Muslim population over which they claim sovereignty. With this reading of the Noah story, ISIS, like the Fatimids before them, makes its rejection by its fellow Muslims a point of pride. The group's leadership cast themselves as lonely proclaimers of God's truth in a gray, apostate world who will see themselves vindicated in the end. And they present the violence they threaten and practice to force acquiescence to their rule as godly "intellectual terrorism" with precedent in the life of the Prophet himself.

This is not how a group successfully winning hearts and minds reads scripture. We would do well to remember this when we wonder about their standing in the world Muslim community.

## Notes

1. “The Flood of the Mubāhalah,” *Dabiq* 2 (Ramaḍān 1435 [June–July 2014]): 20–22.

2. Islam began as a stranger: e.g., Muslim b. Ḥajjāj, *Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim*, *imān* 145–146, *bāb* 65 (*bayān anna’l-islām bada’a gharīban...*), nos. 270–271; among the Six Books, this tradition is also attested in the collections of Ibn Majah and al-Tirmidhī. The division of the *ummah* into sects: e.g., Abū Dāwūd al-Sijistānī, *Sunan Abī Dāwūd*, *sunnah* 1–2, nos. 4579–4580; also attested in Ibn Majah and al-Tirmidhī.

3. Usually known as the *sawād al-a’zam* or tradition of the ‘greatest majority’: e.g., Muḥammad b. Yazīd Ibn Majah, *Sunan Ibn Majah*, *fitan* 25, no. 3950.

# ISIS: The Taint of Murji'ism and the Curse of Hypocrisy

Jeffrey Bristol

## *Abstract*

This paper is an attempt to analyze one facet of ISIS' discourse in order to understand why the movement chooses the arguments it does and how it uses them to achieve particular goals. One of the most commonly occurring tropes in ISIS propaganda is its critique of its opponents as "Murji'ites." The Murji'ites were a school of Islamic thought that emerged early on in the history of the Muslim community, and ideas and claims associated with them were critical in debates over Islamic identity and the path to salvation. In the modern era, various movements have re-interpreted the traditional discourse on the Murji'ites in specific ways, and ISIS spokesmen draw on both classical and modern elaborations of an idea of Murji'ism to polemicize against Muslims who resist their claims and fail to support them. Thus, we see that ISIS does not create its rhetoric out of whole cloth, but borrows pieces from Islamic intellectual tradition selectively and engages with older Salafist ideas in the articulation of a new ideology.

## Introduction

There are many tropes threaded throughout the propaganda of the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria.<sup>1</sup> It uses these themes to create a compelling message both to inform the world of its intentions and win recruits to its cause. These themes are usually drawn from traditional Islamic discourse, which serves to plug the group into the greater religious tradition and presents it as having a legitimate religious voice. It also helps the group define and delineate what it considers “Islamic” and what not. One of ISIS’ most commonly used tropes is its critique of opponents as “Murji’ites,” a school of Islamic thought that developed in the early period of the Islamic community and was central in debates concerning Islamic identity and salvation.

ISIS uses the term *murji’i* as a pejorative, though what it means by the label is not always clear. It is often associated with ideas of hypocrisy (*nifāq*), oppression (*taḡhūt*) and innovation (*bid’ah*). These three concepts create a powerful trinity in ISIS’ view of Islam and the world and are instrumental parts of its use of ideology to create and maintain a state based on its narrow and specific reading of the Islamic intellectual tradition and its identification of what “correct” Islam is.

As we shall see, Murji’ism is a complex topic. Whether one speaks of the mainstream Islamic intellectual tradition or the specific interpretation of ISIS, Murji’ism often reflects contemporary needs for vilification or spurring followers to political action. While Murji’ism began as a response to a specific split within the Islamic community, a response intended as a compromise position to avoid division, it turned just as quickly into a vehicle for political and theological mobilization—in some cases as a rallying cry, but in most as a pejorative heresy.<sup>2</sup> The latter conception has been the most enduring in history, and turned Murji’ism into a school where many might accept its tenets but few would espouse them outright.

While the development of Murji’ism as a school of thought that no one subscribes to but many degrade is interesting in and of itself, what

is significant is how ISIS uses it to create a coherent discourse through which to accomplish recruiting and self-legitimization. In recognizing this, it is important to see how ISIS has adapted the concept from previous movements and bundled it with a group of other highly productive symbols to strengthen its message. This symbolic action is important to recognize, for much of ISIS' success has emerged not just on the battlefield but by deploying rhetoric backed by a compelling ideology to motivate individuals to migrate and die for its cause.

Breaking down the package of Murji'ism and its associated ideas is important because it shows how ISIS is able not only to use the Islamic intellectual tradition but also to improvise to create compelling arguments. By reconfiguring old ideas, it gains a veneer of conservative legitimacy that Islamic fundamentalists value so highly, while maintaining the power to innovate and create new material from old. By combining arguments that obedience to secular law detracts from following a true Islamic path, that refusing to fight in what it identifies as a legitimate jihad contributes strength to the enemy, and that acting in ways contrary to ISIS' demands imperils one's very faith with time-worn arguments about Murji'ism, ISIS can bring its rhetoric to a highly effective level.

In this sense, we should view publications like *Dabiq* and much of ISIS' media production not just as propaganda but as a coherent discourse that intends to build and implement a worldview among its consumers. While some of its material is intended for the outside, most of it is unconvincing to anyone who has not already associated themselves with ISIS' ideology. Instead, ISIS' ideology gives potential recruits and sympathizers a vocabulary and perspective on the world which they can use to inform their own actions and to engage with others they might encounter, whether potential sympathizers or opponents who might try to draw the potential militant from their path.

This paper is an attempt to analyze one facet of ISIS' discourse in order to understand why ISIS chooses the arguments it does, how it uses them, and what end it intends to achieve: to recruit members, inform them of ISIS' policies, and encourage them to act in the world, particularly

to emigrate to Syria and add their manpower to the greater cause. Consequently, the Murji'ite complex serves as an ideal point of entry into the purpose of ISIS' communications and its goals as a movement.

Unfortunately, the debates surrounding Murji'ism are hard to understand. This difficulty emerges in part because the term is an old one and carries much theological baggage, and in part because ISIS develops their own conception of Murji'ism from within a particular modern context. Consequently, this paper will seek first to explore the historical context, development, and use of Murji'ism within the mainstream Islamic intellectual tradition, and then to explain how ISIS interprets and uses the term for its own ends.

### *Historical Murji'ism*

Murji'ism emerged as a theological school very early in the history of Islamic thought. It played a major role in the early community's debates concerning salvation and who had rightful claim to membership in the community. This debate was particularly cogent within the context of the struggle for caliphal authority between 'Alī b. Abī Ṭālib, the Prophet's cousin and presumptive heir to the previous caliph, and Mu'āwiyah b. Abī Sufyān, the governor of Syria and eventual founder of the Umayyad Caliphate. Their conflict revolved around the question of who was the best political leader and most upright Muslim to lead the community.

While this conflict, generally called the First Fitnah (civil war), is popularly understood as the beginning of the Shi'ah-Sunni divide, what is important for our discussion is the emergence of a third division, the Kharijites, who challenged the community by advocating a strict, exclusivist definition of Islam and membership in its community. They considered only the truly righteous as worthy of being called Muslims, a proposition that at the time was interpreted to exclude not just 'Alī and Mu'āwiyah, but also a large segment of the then-current Islamic establishment and community as a whole—a rupture that seriously threatened the unity of the Islamic community.

In the political context of the early community, debate over caliphal legitimacy specifically—and membership in the Islamic community as well—was particularly contentious because it dictated whether one should take up arms against the ruler or not. While the loyalist position held that the Umayyad caliph was not only a legitimate ruler, but also best qualified religiously to guide the community, the extremist opinion, most commonly associated with Kharijism, not only refused to acknowledge the legitimacy of the Umayyad Caliphate, but also advocated armed rebellion against them. Consequently, while moderates might live with either ruling party, the extremes were dedicated to fighting a bloody and divisive conflict that threatened to end Islamic political hegemony and its empire shortly after it had begun.<sup>3</sup>

According to the accounts of later authors, Murji'ism developed initially as a compromise in response to the schismatic threat that Umayyad loyalism and Kharijism posed, a compromise that would ensure the social and political stability of the whole by creating a definition of Islam that would result in broad inclusivity.<sup>4</sup> It centered on an ethos of political quietism.<sup>5</sup> Its center piece was the concept of *irjā'*, meaning “deferral.” Deferral in this case meant the belief that a judgment of another believer's faith cannot be made in the current world but is postponed to the final judgment when God would decide among the worthy.<sup>6</sup> This countered Kharijite extremism in both its political claims (i.e., that the Umayyads should be overthrown) and its personal attacks against individual Muslims whom they viewed as deviating from the faith.<sup>7</sup>

In the specific case of the debate between Mu'āwiyah and 'Alī, deferral meant that the question of who was more eligible to lead the community should be deferred indefinitely, making rebellion an invidious and harmful action even if one viewed either or both of them as illegitimate Muslims. In general terms, it meant the community could be led by anyone who met certain criteria, not merely the most just or the most righteous.<sup>8</sup>

While the idea of deferral was initially the core of the school's ideas, as reflected in one of its earliest expositions in a letter reproduced and discussed by Josef van Ess called the *Kitāb al-Irjā'*, Murji'ism later became



even more strongly associated with a different idea, the separation of deeds from faith.<sup>9</sup> This doctrine, which was often the basis of attacks on the Murji'ites by their opponents, held that Murji'ism improperly separated *islām* (submission, but understood to entail specific actions) from *imān* (faith).<sup>10</sup> This was problematic because Murji'ites (supposedly) believed in deferring judgment to God to such a degree that individuals who committed grave sins that clearly put them outside the pale of Islam, such as apostasy or slander of the Prophet—sins that the Qurʾān itself declares to nullify faith—would remain within the community and still be considered legitimate Muslims, benefitting (both spiritually and materially) from such membership. In essence, critics argued that clear absurdities, injustice, and potential violations of scripture resulted from the Murji'ite position.<sup>11</sup>

In its extreme, these opponents opine, Murji'ism would even allow one to make the illicit licit (*istiḥlāl*) or vice versa, considered to be a grave sin as by doing so, one controverted and abrogated the holy text using one's own reason, replacing God's will with one's own willfulness. Indeed, as time went on, Murji'ism became less and less associated with the concept of *irjāʿ*, despite providing the name of the group, and gained fame in heresiographies for its potential to condone the illicit as licit.<sup>12</sup>

In the narratives passed down to us, the claim that the Murji'ites sought to separate deeds from faith developed as a result of Murji'ism's deployment to rally political action in a later cause, which moved the philosophy from the realm of quietism into sometimes violent activism, with uprisings happening in Khurāsān, in the eastern part of modern-day Iran.<sup>13</sup> During the Umayyad Caliphate, after the First Fitnah, strife emerged between Arab Muslims who participated in the initial invasions and converts who embraced the faith after their lands had been conquered. Converts had many reasons for joining the new faith, aside from personal conviction, and Arabs had many reasons to deny them membership in the community.

Materially, non-Muslims had the burden of two sets of taxes to pay: the *jizyah*, a poll-tax levelled on all non-Muslim inhabitants of the land, and the *kharāj*, a tax that non-Muslim farmers had to pay on the land

they cultivated. Becoming a Muslim meant simultaneously that converts were relieved of the burden of these taxes and that the community at large, which pooled together and paid out the income from these taxes to its membership in the form of stipends, lost revenue. In other words, conversion shifted the tax burden from local residents to Arab armies and settlers. In part because of this, there was a reluctance to admit converts as full-fledged members of the community. This created resentment among many inhabitants of the empire, particularly in remoter areas where there were larger numbers of converts and fewer Arabs.<sup>14</sup>

In this case, Murji'ism allowed community membership based simply on the declaration of faith, not on actions or identity at birth. One merely needed to profess the faith by reciting the *shahādah* and one gained both membership in the community and the alleviation of a significant tax burden. This new understanding of faith became instrumental in several provincial uprisings, in which Murji'ism seems to have coalesced as a more formal school of thought than it had been previously, becoming a vehicle for political action.

This new use of Murji'ism placed it in the center of political and religious debates, however. What had previously been a quietist position now became a lightning rod as individuals within the community took positions for or against it, depending on their own interests and feelings regarding not just theology but also social and political concerns. As a result of this transformation, Murji'ism earned a place of infamy in the realm of heresies. While the converts won their battles and became an indelible part of the larger community, those who embraced Murji'ism erred, so the new heresiographers argued, by pushing inclusion too far.<sup>15</sup>

It is likely that the development of Murji'ism into an activist creed that separates deeds from faith occurred at a later date.<sup>16</sup> This position is neither directly stated nor implied in the founding work of the movement, the aforementioned *Kitāb al-Irjā'* by al-Ḥasan ibn Muḥammad Ibn al-Ḥanafiyah (d. 700), a work that was itself written after the initial conflict over leadership that gave birth to Kharijism. It is significant, however, that at some point the two concepts of deferral and separation were themselves separated; while the latter came to be wholly identified

with Murji'ism and condemned, the former, the principle of *irjā'*, was accepted by many schools of Islamic thought.

It is interesting in this respect to examine the most famous name associated with Murji'ism, the jurist Abū Ḥanīfah (d. 767). Abū Ḥanīfah's inclination toward certain Murji'ite positions is recognized by many scholars; the most significant presentation of Abū Ḥanīfah's Murji'ism in Western scholarship is Joseph Schacht's analysis of the scholar's treatise on the subject called *Kitāb al-Ālim wa'l-Muta'allim*.<sup>17</sup> What is notable about this treatise is that it does not portray Abū Ḥanīfah as unambiguously Murji'ite. Instead, he supports the concept of *irjā'* against its opponents while condemning the Murji'ites as a group for their separation of deeds from faith.<sup>18</sup>

That Abū Ḥanīfah makes this distinction is significant, not just because it shows the general adoption of a popularized concept of *irjā'*, but also because it shows that Murji'ism had crystallized into a heretical epithet at an early date; while Abū Ḥanīfah accepts the basic idea of *irjā'*, he rejects Murji'ism itself as a creed. It also raises the question of who exactly espoused the extremist views with which Murji'ism is associated. It is clear that the doctrine of *irjā'* found adherents, especially among rebellious converts in Khurāsān.<sup>19</sup> However, it is less clear that there was ever a strong party of Murji'ites that accepted unequivocally the doctrine of separating deeds from faith, which makes separating the actual history of the doctrine from its later interpretation extremely difficult.<sup>20</sup> Unfortunately for the school, despite the general adoption of its primary tenet, later thinkers continued to relegate it to the realm of heresy.<sup>21</sup>

If it is true that this second component of Murji'ism was little if at all actually adhered to by real believers, then it indicates the role which Murji'ism as a trope has played in the rhetoric of Islamic factionalism. It shows that the claim of Murji'ism has historically been a powerful accusation that became untethered from any specific social context, making it deployable against opponents who generally fit its mold.<sup>22</sup> This demonstrates the continuity between the past and ISIS' Jihadi-Salafist present, for Murji'ism has been resurrected in recent years as a productive tool

for categorizing and delegitimizing many of the opponents of Salafism within the Islamic community.<sup>23</sup>

While we observe the continuity of ISIS' use of Murji'ism within the Islamic tradition, we should note that ISIS and its contemporaries are not slaves to that intellectual tradition. Indeed, observers have noted that while they are active consumers of the Islamic intellectual past, they also reinterpret that tradition to support their positions.<sup>24</sup> Their use of Murji'ism is no exception. Consequently, before we analyze ISIS' propaganda statements against Murji'ism, we should understand what ISIS and other Jihadist-Salafists mean by the term and how they use this label in conjunction with a series of other topoi to build categories of approbation and stigmatize groups that oppose or rival them.

#### *Renewed accusations of Murji'ism*

Our discussion of the historical development of Murji'ism began and ended very early in Islamic history. This is because Murji'ism formed a key part of debates pertaining to Islamic theology and the identity of those who deserved to be recognized as fellow believers. Such theological questions, including questions about the nature of God and the Qurʾān, were settled fairly early in Islamic history, and as debates about theology waned, intellectuals turned their attention to other subjects.<sup>25</sup> The intellectual disciplines that gained prominence as theology lost it included law, philosophy, mysticism, and the coalescing distinctions between Sunnism and Shi'ism. Indeed, it is in this new intellectual world that we see the emergence of the four legal schools, the much debated "closing of the gates of *ijtihād*," the development of the schools of modern Sufism, and the writings of the great philosophers. It is not until the eighteenth century that we see a resurgence of debates surrounding theology and basic doctrinal questions such as who deserves to be considered a member of the Islamic community.

The re-emergence of theological issues in the Islamic world was sparked by two simultaneous historical events. The first was a revival

movement in the Arabian Peninsula spearheaded by the political expansion of the Ibn Sa‘ūd family and supported by the followers of Muḥammad b. ‘Abd al-Wahhāb (d. 1792), a fundamentalist scholar who preached an extreme doctrine that condemned all forms of Islam deviating from his strict, literalist interpretation of it. He declared that these “alternative” practices of Islam violated *tawḥīd*, or the unity of God, and thereby fell into shirk, or polytheism. His ire was raised especially by Sufi groups and worship at saints’ shrines. The second event was the contemporary emergence of an era of colonialism that brought a package of Western cultural traits often referred to as “modernity” to bear against local folkways and the dominant Islamic intellectual tradition.

Modernity posed a particular challenge to the Islamic intellectual tradition in that, while it was highly sophisticated and cosmopolitan, it had long been accustomed to assimilating other traditions on its own terms. With the loss of political dominance caused by the intrusion of Europeans, Muslim scholars were forced to reconcile with newly dominant foreign traditions. As the influence of Europeans increased, a crisis emerged.

There were two general responses to the crisis that modernity presented in the Islamic world.<sup>26</sup> One was pioneered in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries by thinkers like Sayyid Jamāl al-Dīn al-Afghānī (d. 1897) and Muḥammad ‘Abduh (d. 1905), who suggested an integration of Western sciences with Islam, with one informing the other to create a synthesis between them. This required rethinking many basic assumptions in the Islamic tradition, including law, mysticism, and, to a lesser extent, theology. This approach, which is followed by the majority of Muslims today, envisioned an Islamic modernity in which Islam would stand alongside Christianity as a religion of, to use a favorite term of the nineteenth century, “progress.”

In the second response, counter-narratives to the European incursion were formed. These approaches emphasized rejecting modern interpretations of the world and religion as iniquitous and un-Islamic. In this sense, their followers can be described as “fundamentalists.” In this

world-view, certain aspects of modern technology and social thought might be incorporated into Islamic society but only if strictly subordinated to Islam. This counter-movement often went further than just demanding a struggle against the Western import of modernity, however; it demanded total reform of the Islamic tradition at hand, following in the footsteps of Wahhabism and related movements.<sup>27</sup> It also, in many cases, viewed local interpretations of Islam, such as worship at saints' shrines, as foreign to a religion that should be solely inspired by its sacred text and original traditions.<sup>28</sup> Because of these concerns, the fundamentalists felt it was time to clean the slate and re-examine the basic questions of Islam, such as who was and was not a Muslim and what was and was not Islamic. This necessitated a revival of the basic traditions of theology. The fundamentalists who were most heavily involved in this re-evaluation and who believed that the only the Qur'ān and the *sunnah* of the Prophet (his sayings and behavior) could resolve religious issues came to be known as Salafists.

Thinkers of a Salafist orientation adopted different approaches to the perceived need to re-evaluate Islamic thought. One was followed by individuals such as Sayyid Qutb (d. 1962), who considered classical Islamic scholarship as a whole to be useful but unnecessary. Instead, he sought to read the Qur'ān and *sunnah* with new eyes, ironically becoming innovative in his own way. The second group, the tradition to which ISIS and its ideologues belong, viewed the classical scholarship as a bedrock foundation but disagreed with the way in which that scholarship had been used, especially regarding the creation of what they considered illegitimate divisions within the community, such as the legal schools, as well as innovations such as the introduction of Greek philosophy and other non-Islamic forms of knowledge into Islamic thought. This led to a selective and particular interpretation of the tradition.

As time went on, another group of Salafists revived arguments about Murji'ism to bolster positions against the various semi- or wholly secular regimes of the Arab world. In targeting Muslim governments, these Salafists differ from other fundamentalists like Bin Laden who

focused their attacks on the “far enemy” of the West.<sup>29</sup> This reorientation created a problem, however, for the regimes these Salafists targeted are nominally Muslim, and a tenet of Islam, historically observed perhaps more often in the breach, prohibits Muslims from fighting among themselves. Consequently, in order for those Salafists who urged violent attacks against regimes in the Middle East to justify their call to action, they needed a way to demonstrate that the governments currently administering Islamic countries are not themselves Islamic, nor their rulers truly Muslim.<sup>30</sup>

In order to accomplish this, the two schools of Salafism, those like Qutb who reinterpreted the texts freely and those who more readily turned to and made use of older traditions (albeit selectively), joined forces. Qutb’s idea that the then-current state of affairs in the Arab-Islamic world represented a return to the Jāhiliyyah, or the period of “ignorance” that predated the emergence of Islam, combined with *takfīr*, the labeling of an opponent as an infidel, provided useful arguments to convince the Salafists’ followers that secular regimes were in fact apostates.<sup>31</sup>

These arguments did not work on everybody, however. The willingness of many Salafists to take such an extreme step as to discount the profession of faith made by public persons set off a battle within organizations aimed at Islamic reform, groups like the Muslim Brotherhood, which were often dominated by moderates who were unwilling to take the step of recognizing political rulers as outside the pale of Islam and thereby potentially legitimizing violence against them.<sup>32</sup>

The split between the moderate and the extreme Islamic opposition presented the radical Salafist party with a rhetorical problem similar to that of critiquing Muslim regimes despite the taboo on fomenting *fitnah*. In this case, rather than resorting to the reasoning of contemporary thinkers such as Qutb, these partisans reached back into the classical period of Islamic thought, painting their opponents as Murji’ites for refusing to condemn world leaders as apostates and thereby preventing a full Islamic movement against them.<sup>33</sup>

While this trend emerged most markedly in debates within the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood during the 1960s and '70s, it eventually influenced Saudi Salafist thought generally and spread into other parts of the radical thoughtworld. In Saudi Arabia such rhetoric was particularly intense given the Islamic nature of the monarchy, which has claimed a wholly Islamic basis for its laws and appointed jurists to support its position. Many groups within the kingdom objected to this stance, however, and pointed to the foreign origin of some statutes, presenting a serious problem to the regime's legitimacy. Ultimately, the biggest security threat came with the attacks on the holy cities of Mecca and Medina in 1979, an act committed by a radical Salafist that galvanized opponents of the regime within the kingdom.<sup>34</sup>

In the interim, many events, including the war against the Soviets in Afghanistan and the attacks by Al-Qā'idah against Western targets, captured the imagination of Islamic radicals and put a temporary halt to their activities within their own borders. This was only a temporary respite, however: as soon as the Afghan war ended and American intervention in the Middle East opened the door to political instability in Iraq and elsewhere, Salafist activity against local regimes increased. This required these radical groups to both justify their attacks to their fellow citizens and to convince bystanders of why they should believe their neighbors to be apostates living un-Islamic lives.

Individuals who attempt to encourage militant action within their own states have had convenient recourse to the idea of Murji'ism. In recent years, perhaps its greatest exponent has been the Jordanian thinker Abū Muḥammad al-Maqdisī, a radical Jihadi-Salafist who influenced ISIS through his role as an author of radical literature, though he himself has come to oppose ISIS. He was also the one-time spiritual mentor for Abū Muṣ'ab al-Zarqawī (d. 2006), the founder of the Al-Qā'idah branch in Iraq that would eventually evolve into the Islamic State. Maqdisī himself came by the use of the term "Murji'ite" and much of his knowledge through his connections with the Afghan Arab movement as well as from time spent studying in Saudi Arabia. Maqdisī's near-constant time in prison



after returning to Jordan gave him the opportunity to spread his message and view of Islam there, including how to use the term and who should be considered a Murji'ite.

These parties use the term “Murji’ism” to provide the ideological inspiration to violent action described above. In this sense, Murji’ism is paired with its classical opposing heresy, Kharijism, to categorize groups and individuals accordingly as they are perceived to employ *takfir* either too little or too often.<sup>35</sup> Those individuals who are either working within the system or who are quietist, advocating a suspension of judgment against secular rulers or peaceful resistance to them, are labeled as Murji’ites, while other groups who are perceived as being too narrow-minded in their activities (especially if that group opposes and uses *takfir* against one’s own) is viewed as being Kharijite, condemning the righteous Muslim as being unrighteous.<sup>36</sup> ISIS has repeatedly done this in its propaganda.<sup>37</sup>

These classical terms provide a framework for discussion, one that ISIS uses to identify which groups are associated with them and which are opposed to them. By identifying and exploring the reasons for such associations, ISIS is able to identify behaviors which it variously condones or condemns, isolating its opponents from political support, while marshalling support for their own cause. While this paper does not cover ISIS’ use of Kharijism as an accusation—an accusation which ISIS itself often bears—this seems to occur less frequently and with less vigor than the accusation of Murji’ism. On the whole, understanding the latter term’s use by ISIS and what ISIS means when it refers to an opponent as a Murji’ite is significant for understanding who it perceives as its allies and enemies, how it mobilizes support for or against them, and what kind of world ISIS intends to create.

### *ISIS’ interpretation of Murji’ism*

Murji’ism, as ISIS understands it, is primarily concerned with separating deeds from faith and affirming that any Muslim, no matter

how iniquitous in action, is counted as part of the community.<sup>38</sup> ISIS uses Murji'ism as an opprobrium, and by condemning other Muslims as Murji'ites, ISIS implicates them in hypocrisy by arguing that because Murji'ites hold that deeds are separate from faith, then such people claim that a person can commit iniquitous deeds and still called a Muslim. As a result, Murji'ites call un-Islamic deeds Islamic. ISIS takes this argument further by supposing that all Muslims living in non-Islamic contexts are *ipso facto* Murji'ites and hypocrites.<sup>39</sup>

There is a link missing in this argument: it is not clear that just because a Muslim lives in a non-Islamic society, that individual must engage in or endorse non-Islamic behavior. This logical flaw is, in fact, a point Maqdisi and other Salafists opposed to ISIS recognize and the reason some of them label either all of ISIS or parts of ISIS as Kharijites or worse than Kharijites.<sup>40</sup> As we shall see, however, ISIS explicitly identifies an individual with their society, a fact that has powerful consequences for motivating action, and thus plays an important role in ISIS' propaganda.

Identifying a person with their social context is central to ISIS' use of Murji'ism to create a complex that defines and links together the ideas of innovation, hypocrisy/apostasy, and *tāghūt*, or "oppression." Together these terms are part of the main driving force for ISIS' propaganda machine and form the compass rose of ISIS' view of contemporary political structures.

While these terms are important within ISIS' understanding of the world, the organization left them largely undefined explicitly until *Dabiq* 8, in which it devoted an entire section to Murji'ism and its "taint" entitled "Irajā': The Most Dangerous Bida'." In this article, ISIS describes what it understands Murji'ism to be and discusses why it is a heresy, citing several scholars to support their opinion.<sup>41</sup> The author begins his discussion of Murji'ism by explaining the idea of *irjā'*, but it is an explanation specific to the Salafist context. They identify *irjā'* as a reaction against the excesses of Kharijism and understand Murji'ism as a deviation that went too far the other way. In doing so, he claims that the Murji'ites "created their own sect."<sup>42</sup> This is an important accusation, for ISIS believes that true

Islam is one wholly without sects, even without the traditional four schools of jurisprudence, so that any creation of sectarianism renders one's Islam void.<sup>43</sup>

They also define *irjā'* itself, though ISIS' definition requires some interpretation. In *Dabiq* 8 they say that "they [the Murji'ites] expelled action from the reality of *īmān* [faith] thereby 'delaying' action beyond *īmān*'s definition, and this is the linguistic root for the word *Irjā'*, as *Irjā'* means 'a delay.'"<sup>44</sup> This is a somewhat cryptic definition of *irjā'* and it is not clear what ISIS understands is or has been delayed. Is the action (or the judgment of the action, which was the original understanding of *irjā'*) delayed, or does "delay" refer to removing action from "*īmān*'s definition." Either is possible.

That ISIS uses "delay" to imply the removal of action from faith is supported by much of the rest of the article, which focuses on the Murji'ite belief that action has no bearing on faith. ISIS cites numerous scholars who make this argument, each condemning Murji'ism to varying degrees.<sup>45</sup> What is significant is that these condemnations take on a straw man quality. None of them asks the question of whether someone who maintains Murji'ism but acts righteously is considered to have valid faith. Instead, ISIS assumes that a Murji'ite is not practicing their faith, and not just on account of small oversights, but rather by committing such grave errors as never fasting and even praying in the opposite direction of the *qiblah*. Further, ISIS sees a Muslim's tolerance of these acts as being just as severe as committing the violations themselves.<sup>46</sup>

While the construction of this straw man is unsurprising given how heresies have been used in the history of Islamic rhetoric, it does accomplish a number of things. First, it allows ISIS to demonstrate clearly that Murji'ism is a heresy that places one outside the pale of Islam. Second, by identifying it as a sect, they can connect it to charges of *bid'ah*. Third, by redefining *irjā'* and emphasizing the aspect of belief in the separation of deeds from faith—and then pushing it still further to say that Murji'ites necessarily exclude deeds from faith—ISIS can begin to construct an elaborate definition of hypocrisy, which it then uses to paint large numbers of groups both as Murji'ites and hypocrites.

At the end of the article in *Dabiq* 8, ISIS goes further in adapting the idea of *irjā'* by arguing that there are different forms of it infecting the “battleground of Shām,” a fact that goes a long way to legitimizing or delegitimizing parties in the larger conflict. ISIS defines Syria’s *irjā'* as being “‘Islamic factions’ with a nationalist agenda” and “[n]ationalist factions with an ‘Islamic’ agenda.”<sup>47</sup> These two categories include all groups supported by outside regimes or aligned with non-ISIS ideologies and encompasses both small groups and larger forces such as the Free Syrian Army.<sup>48</sup>

While these groups often have very different goals, what they do share in common is opposition to ISIS and its brand of transnational Islamic hegemony. They also enjoy support from Arab regimes, the very regimes ISIS opposes and that have been the targets of criticism from other Jihadi-Salafists. In accordance with ISIS’ intellectual heritage, it seems to be precisely this connection to the mainstream Islamic world that gives these groups the taint of Murji’ism, a fact confirmed in one of ISIS’ first public uses of the label “Murji’ite” in Abū Bakr al-Baghdādī’s speech announcing the caliphate, “This is the Promise of Allah.”<sup>49</sup>

The result of this taint, and its sure sign, was these groups’ “hypocrisy” in taking territory and then refusing to implement “shari’ah,” which when used by ISIS means the narrow interpretation of shari’ah that ISIS itself supports.<sup>50</sup> At the end of the article, the author does finally allude to a more classical idea of *irjā'* (i.e., the denial of a connection between actions and faith, rather than that of supporting what it perceives to be pseudo-Islamic regimes) by saying that these groups did not implement the shari’ah because their own fighters are not good Muslims.<sup>51</sup>

### *The Murji’ite bundle, 1: Innovation*

This section introduces our exploration of the Murji’ite bundle. The term “bundle” appears here because of the multifaceted nature of ISIS’ use of the idea of Murji’ism. When ISIS refers to Murji’ism, as they make clear throughout the article “Irja’: The Most Dangerous Bid’a,”

they mean more than just Murji'ism itself. In ISIS' propaganda, they tightly connect Murji'ism with the ideas of innovation, hypocrisy, and oppression to create a powerful means of accusing its opponents of multiple sins in a single instant. As a result, to understand the importance of ISIS' rhetorical use of Murji'ism fully, we must break down the bundle ISIS has created and examine its parts.

Innovation (*bid'ah*) is a term with a long history in the Islamic intellectual tradition. Originally, it referred in a general way to any practice that came after the time of the Prophet and his Companions, and as such had two modalities: *bid'ah ḥasanah* and *bid'ah al-madhūmah*. The first class of innovations were good; these included practices that can even be considered individual obligations, such as the study of grammar or rhetoric. The second class includes innovations that run contrary to the principles outlined in the four sources of law: the Qur'ān, the sunnah, the consensus of scholars, and the use of reason or analogy.<sup>52</sup>

While the above represents a traditional view of *bid'ah*, there has always been a strong minority condemning any innovation as heterodox and unauthorized. While such an extreme position has historically been marginal, such condemnation has become increasingly commonplace in fundamentalist rhetoric with the rise of Salafism and its conscious ahistorical claim of returning to what these groups perceive as the unmediated practice of the Prophet. Because any innovation by definition was absent from the Prophet's original community in Medina, any innovation is by definition forbidden, no matter how beneficial its character. The accusation of innovation is, for example, common in the works of Sayyid Qutb, occurring in both *In the Shade of the Qur'ān*, his exegesis of the holy text, and *Milestones*. Osama Bin Laden also employed the term as a criticism of Arab regimes that adopted pro-Western stances and thus, in his view, compromised the faith.<sup>53</sup> It is also characteristic of Bin Laden's own intellectual heritage, standing as a cornerstone of Ibn 'Abd al-Wahhāb's original reformation movement.<sup>54</sup>

It is not coincidence, therefore, that one of ISIS' major complaints about those it calls Murji'ites concerns their perceived innovation within

the Islamic intellectual tradition.<sup>55</sup> Because Murji'ism falls outside of the original intentions of the Qur'ān as ISIS understands it, it is automatically suspect as *bid'ah*. In this way, ISIS' condemnation of Murji'ism parallels the similar condemnation of the Shi'ah. Many groups, such as Al-Qā'idah, condemn the Shi'ah as *ahl al-bid'ah* (people of innovation), referring primarily to what is perceived as an innovation in the Shi'i theological elaboration of the role of the Imāms in religion.<sup>56</sup> Piggy-backing on this rhetorical tradition, ISIS is able to condemn multiple parties under the same accusation: the Shi'ah are guilty of innovation through avowal of the Imamate, while Murji'ites are guilty of innovation by reinterpreting their legal obligations, but doing so while still claiming to be within the "orthodox" Sunni tradition.<sup>57</sup>

We see here that *bid'ah* is a very basic and powerful charge. ISIS can potentially call anything it disagrees with an innovation, and by doing so portrays itself as the only true inheritor of the Islamic tradition as established and practiced by the Prophet. Moreover, because ISIS believes it has the only true view of Islam, ISIS assumes it must know what was originally intended to be part of the faith, both what it permits and what it excludes, legitimizing its authority to label phenomena as innovative or not. It follows then that anything falling outside of its understanding of Islam must be, *ipso facto*, an innovation.<sup>58</sup>

On the surface, the ubiquitous rhetorical possibility of *bid'ah* seems to take some of the sting out of its accusation, for anyone other than ISIS is ripe for condemnation on its account. It is significant that while ISIS often implies as much, it reserves its special critique of *bid'ah* for particular groups. In the case of Murji'ism, ISIS not only condemns it as *bid'ah* but actually writes in the subtitle of its article on *irjā'* that it is the "most dangerous" innovation.<sup>59</sup> In doing so, it singles out this theological tendency as deserving special condemnation and makes it clear that when ISIS refers to specific groups as Murji'ites, it also considers them innovators. Murji'ism is such a dangerous innovation because of its connection to hypocrisy, a sin that puts into question a Muslim's very belonging to the community.<sup>60</sup>

*The Murji'ite bundle, 2: Hypocrisy*

Perhaps the most significant element of ISIS' Murji'ite bundle is hypocrisy. Like the concept of Murji'ism itself, ISIS uses this term both in its classical sense and in a more particular way that links ISIS with a broader spectrum of Jihadi-Salafist thought, while simultaneously taking the idea farther than previously realized due to its declaration of the Caliphate. Its adaptations specifically serve to effect its recruitment and ideological goals. Both definitions are covered in the article on Murji'ism cited often here, "Irjā': The Most Dangerous Bid'a" from *Dabiq* 8, though its more particular use of the term is more prevalent throughout *Dabiq* and in ISIS speeches generally.

In general, but in this article especially, Murji'ism is strongly linked to hypocrisy. This link emerges for complex reasons. First, ISIS relies on the traditional claim that Murji'ism removes deeds from faith, meaning that a Murji'i can represent any act, in theory, as being Islamic even if the act is repugnant to the faith. This leads, in their novel interpretation, to the assertion that all Muslims who refuse to affiliate with ISIS or actively oppose them are essentially Murji'ites, and thus hypocrites.

The reader should bear in mind that ISIS' world is one of philosophical extremes and dichotomies. Consequently, if one can do something, one will do it to the extreme of either virtue or vice. As a result, ISIS assumes that a Murji'ite will necessarily commit grave errors on account of his or her Murji'ism.<sup>61</sup> The discrepancy between action and belief is a hallmark of the classical Islamic understanding of hypocrisy, though in this case it is inverted. The classical example of the hypocrites emerged from Muḥammad's community in Medina where they represented old elites who were jealous of Muḥammad's new status and were outwardly righteous Muslims while inwardly scheming to maintain their authority. Consequently, they failed to support the Prophet at crucial moments, especially in battle. The result was something that resembles what we in English typically label as hypocrisy, meaning individuals who pretend to do one thing while in their inmost hearts will another. ISIS does acknowledge this form of hypocrisy and uses it to condemn certain

actors.<sup>62</sup> However, its more powerful and significant model of hypocrisy involves accusing individuals of inwardly believing they are Muslim while outwardly acting in a non-Islamic (at least as understood by ISIS) manner, reversing the traditional understanding of hypocrisy.<sup>63</sup>

This new model of hypocrisy is particularly useful for ISIS. The conventional definition relied on the discrepancy between outward righteousness and inward belief, which is hard to establish concretely since inner belief is not observable. ISIS' understanding of hypocrisy, on the other hand, is as something both observable and readily condemnable. The explicability of their model also explains why ISIS is so concerned to define and refute hypocrites: in doing so, ISIS can claim that all Muslims not affiliated with them are hypocrites at best based on what they do or fail to do, especially failing to support ISIS militarily. This support (or the lack of it) is empirically provable in the world.

In order to understand why ISIS is interested in interpreting hypocrisy this way, we must look beyond its extended discussion of Murji'ism in *Dabiq* 8 and examine earlier discussions, such as that in an article found in *Dabiq* 7, "The Extinction of the Grayzone."<sup>64</sup> The idea of a disappearing "grayzone" is important in ISIS' propaganda and draws on a number of Islamic tropes, reinterpreted in a particular fashion. The first is the idea that the world is necessarily drawn into two camps: believers and unbelievers. In the time before ISIS when there was no caliphate, ISIS argues, who belonged to which camp was unclear. While some, like Bin Laden, were clearly in the camp of the believers and others, such as Christian Euro-American soldiers in Iraq and Afghanistan, were clearly nonbelievers, there were many in the middle, such as ordinary Muslims. These were the true inhabitants of ISIS' grayzone: potential believers who had not yet picked a side.<sup>65</sup>

According to ISIS' understanding of history and the course that history will take, its creation of a caliphate represents an epochal moment that caused the "extinction of the grayzone." Before its existence, Muslims could choose an intermediate space while clinging to a modicum of righteousness because there was nowhere to go where one could truly be Muslim both outwardly and inwardly. With the creation of the Islamic



State, however, this changed. Because ISIS supposedly represents the true caliphate, Muslims are required to emigrate to support it, especially by lending it aid against its foes. As a result of this necessity, the grayzone is shrinking; those who can immigrate to the territory of the Islamic State do so (as they must), while those who do not choose apostasy and damnation by remaining behind.<sup>66</sup>

We also note that Murji'ism and the grayzone are linked. The grayzone for ISIS is defined by its hypocrisy as it is the proper domain of hypocrites. People who claim (and may inwardly believe) they are Muslim but do not act their Islam out live in the grayzone.<sup>67</sup> What this functionally means is that any individual who prays, fasts, and acts according to an understanding of Islamic law that differs from that of ISIS is a *de facto* hypocrite unless they make an effort to be otherwise. These people are the Murji'ites: they claim to be believers but do not fight the holy war like believers.<sup>68</sup>

This point is important for ISIS' recruiters. The various authors of *Dabiq* and spokespeople for the Caliphate argue in many places that because the non-Islamic world is so non-Islamic, any individual who lives in it becomes an apostate themselves regardless of their intention.<sup>69</sup> This is because the very environment is imbued with what ISIS perceives not just as non-Islamic but anti-Islamic behavior.<sup>70</sup> As a result of having to be on the street with immodestly dressed women (this includes even women wearing *hijāb* but not the more substantial *niqāb*), shopping in a store that accepts credit cards, or any range of things, a Muslim becomes a hypocrite involuntarily by accepting these facts and not fighting against them. Because of inaction, this individual fails in their central responsibility to "command the good and forbid the evil." (A qur'ānic principle, *al-amr bi'l-ma'rūf wa'l-nahy* 'an *al-munkar* means that a Muslim is expected to take steps to enjoin others to do what is right and impede them from doing what is wrong; what exactly this entails is subject to a wide variety of interpretations.) In doing so, they accept the prohibited as if it were permissible and turn Islam on its very head. The only way to avoid this, ISIS very clearly argues, is to emigrate to a location that strictly enforces shari'ah law. Of course, the only place they can do this is in ISIS-controlled

territory, making an argument that seeks to feed their migration machine.<sup>71</sup>

Understanding ISIS' argument about this kind of unconscious hypocrisy is important not just because in doing so we understand their recruitment strategy, but also because it shows us something about how ISIS uses the Islamic intellectual tradition. The fact that they are adept at not only using the traditional understanding of hypocrisy, but creating a new definition based on it and incorporating that into their discourse demonstrates ISIS spokesmen's command of the Islamic intellectual tradition and the power they can derive from it.

*Dabiq* engages in a critique of hypocrisy that is much more traditional as well. While the use of hypocrisy we have just discussed intends to force recruits to take a side and to reinforce ISIS' dichotomies, their use of the more conventional model of hypocrisy has a very different goal: to critique and expose the illegitimacy of Arab regimes. ISIS engages in its closest discussion of this form of hypocrisy in *Dabiq* 8, in the same article in which it attacks Murji'ism. Particularly singled out in this section are "palace scholars": these are individuals linked to Arab governments who claim to produce Islamic legal rulings and knowledge that support their governments' policies and ambitions.<sup>72</sup> As far as ISIS is concerned, Arab nations are especially guilty of hypocrisy because they claim that enforcing shari'ah is important, and they actually have the power to do so, yet they in fact fail to do so.<sup>73</sup>

We must examine here precisely what is meant by failing to enforce shari'ah, for many of these countries, Saudi Arabia especially, view themselves as doing just that. A major element of ISIS' understanding of shari'ah is not just enforcing the so-called *ḥadd* penalties, or those punishments which are specified in the Qur'ān, but also an obligation to fight a holy war against all non-Muslims until the world is divided into two camps and righteousness prevails (and possibly Armageddon occurs). This is an uncompromising stance that would require countries like Saudi Arabia to repudiate fully and completely any involvement with Western countries; this is clearly an impossible extreme, though this demand links ISIS to other Jihadi-Salafists who have come before them.

This condemnation of hypocrisy is much more in line with the classical understanding, according to which individuals claim to observe the law but fail in practice. It is also identical to the major accusation of hypocrisy levelled against the hypocrites of Medina by Muḥammad and his community. Not just “palace scholars” but also quietist scholars are guilty of this passivity, for while the latter condemn Muslim regimes for supporting non-Muslim attacks against Muslims, they do nothing to stop it, implying that they prefer comfort to righteousness.

This form of hypocrisy is very different than the first and is used in different ways, for it is a conscious hypocrisy. The point of these accusations, unlike the former, is not to spur immigration to ISIS’ Caliphate; none of these accusations appear in contexts linked to the concept of *hijrah*, or migration. Instead, they are clear condemnations: a way of indicating who is with and against whom. They are also significant because they allow ISIS to link in the third element of the Murji’ite bundle: the claim of oppression (*ṭaghūt*).

### *The Murji’ite bundle, 3: Oppression*

Oppression links to hypocrisy and innovation because oppression of a believer occurs when an unrighteous power forces the faithful individual to live and act in an environment built on non-Islamic laws that causes a lapse in religious social responsibility (i.e., a failure to command the good and forbid the evil), creating a non-Islamic, innovative environment. Moreover, a consequence of Murji’ite compromises is that individuals are forced into a position where they are called to obey the innovative, secular laws that operate outside the realm of religion and compelled to internalize their personal religious convictions, even potentially acting against them. This creates a *de facto* separation between deeds and faith that turns the true believer into a hypocrite.

ISIS presents a strong narrative regarding the “oppressor” (*ṭaghūt*). This is a particularly potent word within the Salafist community at large. The term comes from the Qur’ān where it is used eight times, all with a satanic or evil connotation. Specifically, *ṭaghūt* is variously used to mean

an idol (Q 2:256, 4:51, 5:60, 39:17), false leaders (Q 2:257, 4:60, 4:76), or Satan (Q 16:36, 5:60, 39:17). As one can see from the different words that are used to translate the term, the significance of *ṭaghūt* is not always clear. Salafists have a very particular understanding of it, which plays a major role in their discourse. Like many aspects of their theology, their understanding of *ṭaghūt* can be traced to Muḥammad b. ‘Abd al-Wahhāb (d. 1792) who wrote about it in his *Risālah fī ma’nā ṭaghūt*. Here he identifies *ṭaghūt* specifically as the religious use of intermediaries to worship God, such as the saint cult.<sup>74</sup>

Contemporary Salafists modified Ibn ‘Abd al-Wahhāb’s understanding of *ṭaghūt* to apply to political circumstances. They were able to do so because Islam to these individuals is a total system, meaning that everything in life must be seen through a religious perspective. This means that just as God is at the apex of religious power, so too must He be at the apex of political power. Consequently, if *ṭaghūt* means the use of intermediaries to worship God, it can also mean the use of intermediaries to usurp the sovereignty of God. In this case, Salafists understand the intermediaries to be democracy, constitutionalism, or any other form of political organization that is not based in Islam. In essence, they argue that all forms of secular government are *ṭaghūt*.<sup>75</sup>

While ISIS fully accepts this understanding of *ṭaghūt*, when it speaks of oppression, it puts its own spin on the term, which becomes clear if we consider oppression in relation to hypocrisy as discussed above. In doing so, we see how ISIS argues that secular governments not only usurp God’s rightful role in the world but actually become religious oppressors themselves; they understand oppression in part as an involuntary regression to Murji’ism and the resultant hypocrisy that obeying secular law forces a Muslim to commit, a hypocrisy that risks turning a believer into an apostate.<sup>76</sup> Thus ISIS connects Murji’ism to the complaint of oppression and forms the basis of their objection to the recognized governments in Muslim countries: by implementing secular law these secular regimes oppress true religion and favor the false.

If we recall the original use of the word *ṭaghūt*, one connotation of which was “idol,” we see how ISIS anchors its use of the term in its tradi-

tional meaning, while simultaneously reinterpreting it. In doing so, it not only draws a connection between the current period and the Islamic past, implying that the impieties of today are remnants from those of yesterday, so further legitimizing itself as part of an eternal Islamic state; it also emphasizes that the hypocrisy it fights is part of an undying, recurrent threat to religious truth that must be defeated. In other words, ISIS represents itself as the only true inheritor of the Islamicizing (though not the prophetic) mission of Muḥammad.

By using *ṭaghūt* to describe the oppressive governments of today, ISIS makes the argument that these states are no different than the idols of the past: both draw the worshipper away from God and replace a Muslim's object of worship with ungodly things.<sup>77</sup> The connection between idolatry and unconscious hypocrisy is what completes the circle between oppression and Murji'ism. Murji'ism, or at least its political compromise with a government not based wholly in Islam, is oppressive because it forces potentially righteous individuals into unrighteous lives, oppressing them into unreligion. Consequently, the only reasonable, Islamic reaction is to overthrow those governments and implement a religious regime that would support what ISIS considers the true version of Islamic law, thereby freeing its adherents from the oppression of the unjust and enabling them to live truly Islamic lives. As a result, rebellion against such governments is really liberation, for nothing can be truer than to live in the way God, the creator, created humans to exist: according to His law.<sup>78</sup>

In order to understand this fully, we note that ISIS considers politics to be a zero-sum game: whatever it loses is gained by its opponents and whatever its opponents lose, ISIS gains. Compromise is impossible, for it means both the absolute weakening of ISIS and the strengthening of its opponents. Moreover, because truth must be stronger than, and eventually vanquish, falsehood, the struggle to live a religious and moral life is a strictly win/lose contest: if one unrighteous element remains in righteous society, that society becomes instantly and irrevocably polluted, and pollution must be removed until purity is reached, constituting the *telos* of creation and supporting ISIS' apocalyptic narrative. This is the essence of their hastening the "extinction of the grayzone."

Of course, one can argue that there are many ways to overthrow the unrighteous, and that the ballot box, or cooperating with oppressive regimes, could be one of them. The potential for election to change governmental direction toward Islamic righteousness has long been a staple in moderate Islamic political thought, a principle embraced by such Islamic intellectuals as Mawdūdī, Yūsuf al-Qaraḏāwī, and others.<sup>79</sup> One of the most famous and influential parties endorsing this position has been the Muslim Brotherhood, a group that has played a key role in the development of Salafist thought as described above. The success and notoriety of the last group looms so large, in fact, that belief in the potential for democracy to produce an Islamic state is a heresy ISIS calls *ikhwāniyyah*, or the way of the (Muslim) Brotherhood (*ikhwān al-Muslimīn*).<sup>80</sup>

ISIS views *ikhwāniyyah* as compromise and considers it absolutely impossible. Why ISIS argues this derives from two primary considerations. The first is discussed above, namely that politics is a zero-sum game of absolute winners and absolute losers, and the hybrid that would result from using a sinful instrument such as democracy during the transition to absolute, unquestioned “Islamic” rule is unacceptable as a government under which righteous Muslims can live. The second reason ties into ISIS’ understanding of Murji’ism. It is clear from its statements both in *Dabiq* and elsewhere that ISIS views even the Brotherhood and other popular Islamic political organizations as being guilty of the sin of Murji’ism.

While we have seen that their strongest argument against Murji’ism’s conflation of right and wrong concerns the involuntary hypocrisy Muslims within state systems experience, ISIS also condemns democracy for the oppression it visits on God. In their understanding of authority and sovereignty, the only legitimate sovereign authority is God, and claiming to have authority from any other source is sinful and arrogant. Since voting is clearly an act that legitimizes a power other than God’s and creates a law that deviates from His command, the act of engaging with a secular government through voting and thereby legitimizing its power is a hypocritical act for the true Muslim. In essence,

this argument brings the idea of *ṭaghūt*, or false idols, to its logical conclusion by arguing that following corrupt regimes results in *shirk*, or polytheism, because one assigns what should be God's (sovereignty) to something else.<sup>81</sup>

This prohibits using democracy as a means to a righteous end because the means itself desecrates the divine. By the very fact of engagement with an oppressive or potentially oppressive power, one accepts *de facto* the authority of a power other than God, reducing one's faith through that action. Consequently, since the means of countering the system from within are iniquitous, even potentially playing the system against itself becomes an impossibility.

This uncompromising stance toward the oppressor forces a person into armed opposition to all governments other than the caliphate of ISIS. While a comprehensive discussion of ISIS' arguments for the importance of what it considers jihad within the correct practice of Islam is outside of the scope of our discussion, we should observe that fighting a holy war against the oppressors is one of the only ways of definitively removing oneself from potential stigma as a hypocrite, for only in open rebellion can one be sure that one is not contributing to the success of a regime based in a law other than God's and therefore causing oneself, no matter how unwillingly, to stray from the fold and become a hypocrite at best and an apostate at worst. In this way, the Murji'ite bundle functions as an intellectual complement to the physical isolation and commitment created through ISIS' emphasis on violence, which at once seduces potential recruits and simultaneously cuts them off from life and society outside of the Islamic State.<sup>82</sup>

The result of this stance is to lock the followers of ISIS into its organization and leave no ideological room for escape. In a sense, one's Islam becomes defined as much by what one opposes as what one does, for it is not just performing God's obligations that makes one a Muslim, but also opposing anything that might trap one into sin. Ultimately these traps include any political organization that does not fall under ISIS' umbrella, making ISIS the single arbiter of what can legitimately be considered Islamic. Anything else is oppressive, for even if an organ-

ization outside of ISIS does not oppose ISIS actively, ISIS ensures that it is categorized in such a way that it becomes an anathema, which is the true meaning of the “extinction of the grayzone” cited in *Dabiq* 7.

### Conclusion

One of the most significant aspects of ISIS' media output is its ability to use rhetoric to affect action in the world. Much of ISIS' success in recruiting fighters from abroad, attracting separatist groups in countries as far flung as Libya and Afghanistan to affiliate with it as well as defectors from other Syrian rebel groups, has to do with its positioning itself as the only legitimate Islamic state and its caliphate as the realization of all legitimate Islamic political efforts. This does not imply that battlefield success or control of territory does not also play a key role in ISIS' success as an organization, but the rhetoric and tangible successes feed each other. Moreover, its rhetoric supplied much of the basis for ISIS' initial expansion and provided the spark that lit its explosion into the Syrian scene.

What is also significant is that ISIS does not create its rhetoric from whole cloth, but borrows pieces from the Islamic intellectual tradition in which it partakes. By using traditional Islamic tropes and themes, ISIS is able both to signal its legitimacy and direct the action of others to support its success in the fields of battle and politics. It cements its legitimacy, showing its erudition and mastery of complex theological and legal topics, and demonstrating that it has the best, most comprehensive and divinely sanctioned answers to the faithful's questions.

In this paper, we have examined a single piece of this rhetoric: Murji'ism. By necessity we have narrowed our compass to the most prominent English language publications. Though we have had a narrow purview, it is a significant one. Murji'ism is clearly a topic ISIS cares deeply about, having discussed it in nearly every issue of *Dabiq*. It is also important because through what I call the Murji'ite bundle, ISIS is able to link complicated but compelling arguments through a simple theme that is unarguably Islamic, grounded in the tradition's history. It is also



significant that ISIS has been able to plug into three of the major bugbears of Salafist thought—hypocrisy, innovation, and oppression—using a single trope.

While this paper has been concerned with a single theme, there are many other tropes within ISIS' materials that beg for similar treatment, such as its use of Murji'ism's correlate, Kharijism. Only through understanding many of these themes will we begin to comprehend the power and allure ISIS has over its supporters and the nature of its appeal to Muslims throughout the world.

Above all, we see that Murji'ism is a theological concept that is alive and well, one that is capable of being adapted to new contexts and uses. When combined with its partners in the bundle, it is a comprehensive whole that many individuals find compelling and hard to refute. When they do so, however, it is often by using the same categories and terms ISIS itself does, a fact we can see by reviewing the anti-ISIS writings of individuals like Maqdisi. Consequently, understanding the soft power of ISIS will go a long way to countering its hard power, for crafting a strategy to argue against its intellectual positions is as important as creating one to capture its military positions.

Understanding that ISIS does not operate in a vacuum, that it is not a spontaneous product of political instability, is also important. Without understanding the ideological, economic, social, and political factors that gave rise to it, it will be impossible to counter its extremism, and accomplishing the latter is predicated on the former. This effort is often complicated by a tendency to belittle the Islamic credentials of ISIS and its constituents. While it is certainly true that many of its fighters are not very well-educated in Islamic tradition, it is a serious mistake to assume that ISIS does not have its own very learned and erudite scholars. When attempting to understand how ISIS can accomplish the things that it does and convince people to go along with it, it is not to the fighter we must look, but rather to the scholar. This paper is intended to be a step in that direction.

## Notes

All digital content cited in this article was last accessed via the URLs provided in the notes below on September 3, 2021.

1. I would like to thank this paper's reviewers for their insightful comments and help with sources. Without their advice, this would be a far inferior product to what it is.

2. Saleh Said Agha, "A Viewpoint of the Murji'a in the Umayyad Period: Evolution through Application," *Journal of Islamic Studies* 8 (1997): 1–42, 2.

3. Hugh Kennedy, *The Prophet and the Age of the Caliphates: The Islamic Near East from the Sixth to the Eleventh Century* (3rd ed.; London: Routledge, 2016), 68–69. This is the traditional explanation of Kharijism. For a more detailed discussion see Jeffrey Kearney, *Muslim Rebels* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006): 19–53.

4. Understanding the historical development of Islamic ideas that lay outside of the standard orthodoxy is complicated. The historical record is often highly edited by later scholars to produce heresies and doctrines that suit the purposes and arguments of later periods. The account of Murji'ism I describe here relies on the narrative passed down to us through traditional historians. I have done so to make the discussion easier for readers who may not have a technical background in Islamic intellectual history to understand, but also because this is the history of Murji'ism as ISIS understands it, and that which they use in their discussion of the subject. The major heresiographers that have supplied this narrative background are Abū Manṣūr al-Baghdādī (d. 1037) and al-Shahrastānī (d. 1153). Their accounts have been rounded out with modern scholarship to provide what might be considered a traditional account of Murji'ism.

5. Agha, "A Viewpoint of the Murji'a in the Umayyad Period," 4–5.

6. An alternative, though less accepted, meaning is "hope." Muḥammad b. 'Abd al-Karīm al-Shahrastānī, *Muslim Sects and Divisions*, trans. A. K. Kazi and J. G. Flynn (London: Kegan Paul International, 1984), 119.

7. Wilferd Madelung, "Murdji'a," *EI<sup>2</sup>*, s.v. (1993).
8. Tariq Jaffer, "Murji'is," in Gerhard Bowering (ed.), *The Princeton Encyclopedia of Islamic Political Thought* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2013), 380–381.
9. Josef van Ess, "Das 'Kitāb al-Irğā' des Ḥasan b. Muḥammad b. al-Ḥanafīyya," *Arabica* 21 (1974): 20–52, 20–25.
10. *Imān* may better understood as "belief," since faith is often understood to be a combination of both actions and belief, but ISIS itself seems to use "faith" as its preferred translation for *imān*, and I will maintain that usage here.
11. J. Meric Pessagno, "The Murji'a, Imān and Abū 'Ubayd," *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 95 (1975): 382–394.
12. Wilferd Madelung, "The Early Murji'ia in Khurāsān and Transoxania and the Spread of Ḥanafism," in *Religious Schools and Sects in Medieval Islam* (London: Variorum Reprints, 1985), 33.
13. Agha, "A Viewpoint of the Murji'a in the Umayyad Period," 18–21.
14. Madelung, "The Early Murji'ia," 33.
15. Agha, "A Viewpoint of the Murji'a in the Umayyad Period," 18–21.
16. Agha, "A Viewpoint of the Murji'a in the Umayyad Period," 21; Madelung, "Murdji'a."
17. Shahristānī, *Muslim Sects and Divisions*, 121; Madelung, "Murdji'a"; Joseph Schacht, "An Early Murci'ite Treatise: The Kitāb al-Ālim wal-Muta'allim," *Oriens* 17 (1964): 96–117.
18. Schacht, "An Early Murci'ite Treatise," 102, 105–6.
19. Madelung, "The Early Murji'a."
20. Agha, "A Viewpoint of the Murji'a in the Umayyad Period," 21.
21. Jaffer, "Murji'is," 380.
22. For a discussion of the various scholars who have used this charge historically and the targets of their accusation, see the article by Pessagno referenced above.
23. Daniel Lav, *Radical Islam and the Revival of Medieval Theology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 6, 8; Joas Wagemakers,

*A Quietist Jihadi: The Ideology and Influence of Abu Muhammad al-Maqdisi* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012): 64, 66. On the term 'jihadi-Salafist,' see below.

24. See Cole Bunzel, "From Paper State to Caliphate: The Ideology of the Islamic State," *The Brookings Project on U.S. Relations with the Islamic World*, Analysis Paper 19 (March 2015): 9–11 ([https:// www.brookings.edu /research/ from-paper-state-to-caliphate-the-ideology-of-the-islamic-state/](https://www.brookings.edu/research/from-paper-state-to-caliphate-the-ideology-of-the-islamic-state/)) and Graeme Wood, "What ISIS Really Wants," *The Atlantic*, March 2015, among others.

25. This does not mean that debate on these issues ceased entirely or that total consensus was reached, but fundamental doctrinal questions such as general notions of the uncreatedness of the Qur'ān, who can claim to be a believer, and what is the proper understanding of the role of prophets in the world were generally fixed by the twelfth century. Even if Sunnis and Shi'ah came to somewhat different conclusions, these groups largely agreed among themselves and focused their debates on other issues. It also does not mean that Murji'ism was totally abandoned. As discussed above, scholars continued to use the term derogatorily and Ibn Taymiyyah had recourse to it in his attempts to rally action against the Mongols (see Lav and Wagemakers for more details), but it and many other theological issues ceased to be the center of intellectual attention.

26. It should be admitted that this dichotomy is a simplistic one and that both modernizing and counter-modernizing movements have borrowed much from one another, but the details of this are beyond this paper's scope. Consequently, this dichotomy is used as a heuristic.

27. Following Dallal, I do not claim that all of the fundamentalist movements have emerged from Wahhabism, but they do share certain common features; since Wahhabism is the major influence on ISIS, I emphasize it here. Ahmad Dallal, "The Origins and Objective of Islamic Revivalist Thought, 1750-1850," *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 113 (1993): 341–359.

28. Here we find a primary distinction between many of the fundamentalist movements found in South Asia, such as Deobandism, that are tolerant of saint cults and many of the Wahhabi-inspired move-

ments that view such acts with opprobrium.

29. Wagemakers, *The Quietist Jihadi*, 72–73.

30. It should be noted here that not all Salafists are violent or advocate violence. Many are, in fact, quite adamant about remaining peaceful and bringing about truly Islamic regimes through education and proselytization (*da‘wah*) rather than violent action. I will use the term “Jihadi-Salafist” here to indicate those Salafists who advocate warfare as a way to Islamic government, as opposed to their quietist brethren.

31. Lav, *Radical Islam*, 55–58, 73–76, 88–89; Wagemakers, *The Quietist Jihadi*, 12, 61–64.

32. Lav, *Radical Islam*, 53–58.

33. Lav, *Radical Islam*; Wagemakers, *The Quietist Jihadi*, 225–226.

34. Wagemakers, *The Quietist Jihadi*, 99–108.

35. The practice of accusing one’s fellow Muslim of being an unbeliever, typically for political purposes.

36. Wagemakers, *The Quietist Jihadi*, 66–68.

37. See “From Hijrah to Khilafah,” *Dabiq* 1 (Ramaḍān 1435 [June-July 2014]): 34–41; “Dismantling a Khārijī Cell,” *Dabiq* 6 (Rabī‘ al-Awwal 1436 [December-January 2014]): 31; “Al-Qā‘idah of Waziristan,” *ibid.*, 51–55, 51; “Irjā’: The Most Dangerous Bid’ah (And its Effect on the Jihād in Shām),” *Dabiq* 8 (Jumādā al-Ākhirah 1436 [March-April 2015]): 39–56, 50, 55; “The ‘Mahdī’ of the Rāfidah: The Dajjāl,” *Dabiq* 11 (Dhū’l-Qa‘dah 1436 [August-September 2014]): 16–17, 16; and “The Revival of Jihād in Bengal: With the Spread of the Light of the Khilāfah,” *Dabiq* 12 (Ṣafar 1437 [November-December 2015]): 37–41, 39.

38. The analysis of ISIS’ rhetoric that follows is drawn largely from their English language magazine *Dabiq*. The choice to do this has been made because *Dabiq* represents one of the most cohesive and largest sources of information approved by ISIS’ officials that exists, is definitively linked to the Islamic State, and is easily accessible beyond its borders without mediation by journalists, ideologues, or other parties.

The separate instances of ISIS’ references to Murji’ism and Murji’ites are too numerous to list. In this paper, we are focused on their use of the

term in widely disseminated, English-language media such as Abū Bakr al-Baghdādī's speech proclaiming the caliphate, "This is the Promise of Allah," and *Dabiq* (Murji'ism is mentioned in *Dabiq* 1, 2, 6, 7, 8, 10, 11, and 12). A basic examination of French and Arabic sources indicates ISIS use of this term is constant across its publications.

39. "Hijrah from Hypocrisy to Sincerity" and "The Fear of Hypocrisy," *Dabiq* 3 (Shawwāl 1435 [July-August 2014]): 25–27; "Bad Company Destroys the Heart," *ibid.*, 32; and "The Extinction of the Grayzone," *Dabiq* 7 (Rabī' al-Ākhir 1436 [January-February 2015]): 54–66, 64.

40. See as an example Maqdisī's statement on this point: Abū Muḥammad al-Maqdisī, "Li-mādhā lam ussimuhum ḥattā al-ān khawārij raghma an fihim min hum aswa' min al-khawārij" ["Why Did I Not Call Them Kharijites Until Now, Even Though Some of Them Are Worse Than Kharijites"], June-July 2015 (<http://justpaste.it/khawarej1>; English translation by Aaron Zelin posted at <https://www.lawfareblog.com/new-article-shaykh-abu-muhammad-al-maqdisi-why-did-i-not-name-them-kharijites-even-until-now>). There are many other quietist Salafis who call ISIS Kharijites, such as the posters at [www.salafisounds.com](http://www.salafisounds.com), e.g. Abu Maryam, "General Advice Regarding the Khawarij Terrorists by Abu Khadeejah," November 24, 2015 (<https://www.salafisounds.com/general-advice-regarding-the-khawarij-terrorists-by-abu-khadeejah/>).

41. "Irjā'," 39–56.

42. "Irjā'," 42.

43. See, for example, their pejorative use of the word "maddhabī," an example of which we find in "Al-Qā'idah of Waziristan," 49, as well as their concern with *fitnah*, which is discussed and condemned in every issue of *Dabiq*. *Fitnah* is especially connected with Murji'ism in "Dismantling a Khārijī Cell," 31. See also "Irjā'," 53 and "The Evil of Division and Taqlīd," *Dabiq* 11 (Dhū'l-Qa'dah 1436 [August-September 2014]): 10–14.

44. "Irjā'," 42.

45. The scholars cited include Ibn Taymiyyah, Muḥammad b. 'Abd al-Wahhāb, Sufyān al-Thawrī, Ibrahim al-Nakhā'ī, and many others.

46. This is not wholly without precedent in classical scholarship: see as an example the condemnation of the Murji'a in Abū Manṣūr al-

Baghdādī, *Moslem Schisms and Sects*, trans. Kate Seelye (New York: AMS Press, 1966), 37.

47. “Irjā’,” 52.

48. Ibid.

49. Abū Bakr al-Baghdādī, “This is the Promise of Allah,” Al Hayat Media Center, June 29, 2014 (English version archived at <https://ia601403.us.archive.org/28/items/nab-mgz/nb231.pdf>).

50. “Irjā’,” 54. For a discussion of the importance of implementing the “correct” form of shari’ah, see William McCants, *The ISIS Apocalypse: The History, Strategy, and Doomsday Vision of the Islamic State* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 2015), 57–58, 82.

51. “Irjā’,” 56.

52. James Robson, “Bid‘a,” *EI<sup>2</sup>*, s.v. (1960).

53. Mary Dudziak, *September 11 in History: A Watershed Moment?* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2008), 71.

54. Andrea Mura, *The Symbolic Scenarios of Islamism: A Study in Islamic Political Thought* (London: Routledge, 2015): 170–171.

55. “Irjā’,” 39; “The Evil of Division and Taqlīd,” 10; “A Fatwā for Khurāsān,” *Dabiq* 10 (Ramaḍān 1436 [June-July 2015]), 18–24, 21.

56. Dudziak, 71.

57. “The ‘Mahdī’ of the Rāfidah,” 39.

58. The enactors of *bid‘ah* are associated with alcoholics and homosexuals, “Bad Company Destroys the Heart,” 32; “The Evil of Division and Taqlīd,” 13. See “And as for the Blessing of Your Lord, then Mention It,” *Dabiq* 12 (Ṣafar 1437 [November-December 2015]): 29–32, 32 for a discussion of the concern with which members of the Islamic state debate whether a thing is *bid‘ah* or not.

59. “Irjā’,” 39.

60. “It’s Either the Islamic State or the Flood,” *Dabiq* 2 (Ramaḍān 1435 [June-July 2014], 5; “The Extinction of the Grayzone,” 62, 66; “Irjā’,” 50.

61. “Irjā’,” 40; “Hijrah from Hypocrisy to Sincerity”; and “The Fear of Hypocrisy,” 25–27.

62. Especially the “palace scholars”; see below.

63. This is the theme of an extended discussion in “Hijrah from Hypocrisy to Sincerity,” 25–34.

64. “The Extinction of the Grayzone.”

65. *Ibid.*, 55.

66. *Ibid.*

67. “Irjā’,” 49.

68. “Hijrah from Hypocrisy to Sincerity” and “The Fear of Hypocrisy,” 25–26.

69. *Dabiq* 3, 7, 8, 12, 13, as well as the speech “This is the Promise of Allah.”

70. As a result of this dichotomy, in ISIS’ world, ‘non-Islamic’ and ‘anti-Islamic’ are identical.

71. For this argument, see especially “Hijrah from Hypocrisy to Sincerity” and “The Fear of Hypocrisy,” 25–27; “And as for the Blessing of Your Lord, then Mention It,” 29–32.

72. “Irjā’,” 42.

73. “Irjā’,” 43–50; “Kill the Imāms of Kufr,” *Dabiq* 13 (Rabī‘ al-Ākhir 1437 [January-February 2016]), 6–9.

74. Dallah, 349.

75. Lav, *Radical Islam*, 143.

76. See “The Fear of Hypocrisy,” 26–27. For ISIS’ argument that this is happening now in Syria, see “And as for the Blessing of Your Lord, then Mention It,” 31.

77. “The Concept of Imamah is from the Millah of Ibrahim,” *Dabiq* 1 (Ramaḍān 1435 [June-July 2014]): 13; “And as for the Blessing of Your Lord, then Mention It,” 29.

78. “And as for the Blessing of Your Lord, then Mention It,” 29.

79. Abū’l-A‘lā al-Mawḍūdī, *Political Theory of Islam* (Lahore: Islamic Publications, 1993), 35; Yusūf al-Qaraḍāwī, “Islam and Democracy,” in *Princeton Readings in Islamist Thought*, eds. Roxanne Euben and Muhammad Qasim Zaman (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2009), 230–245.

80. “Irjā’,” 54.

81. “The Anger Factory,” *Dabiq* 7 (Rabī‘ al-Ākhir 1436 [January-February 2015]): 76–81 (found in a footnote the theological content of



which makes it unlikely to have been written by John Cantlie). For a discussion of the emergence of this position in Islamic radical thought, see Emmanuel Sivan, *Radical Islam* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1985), 73–76.

82. A point explored by Jessica Stern and J. M. Berger in *ISIS: The State of Terror* (New York: HarperCollins, 2015).

# The Islamic State as an Empire of Nostalgia

Thomas Barfield

## *Abstract*

Primary empires were the product of internal development and self-sustaining through the exploitation of their own resources, but there were also historically a large number of “shadow empires.” These were imperial polities that were the products of secondary empire formation, which came into existence as a response to the formation of primary empires elsewhere and could not exist except in interaction with them. One unusual subset of these were “empires of nostalgia” that claimed an imperial tradition and the outward trappings of an extinct empire, but did not themselves meet the basic requirements of an imperial state such as direct control of territory, true centralized rule, or significant urban centers. The most famous European example was the Carolingian Empire established by Charlemagne and its long lived successor, the Holy Roman Empire, which survived as an institution for a thousand years. The Islamic State’s proclamation of itself as a reborn caliphate is now a contemporary example built on nostalgia in the Islamic world for a long-dead empire that still exerts a strong cultural attraction upon many Muslims. The Islamic State justifies its actions and ideologies by attempting to ground them in a lost golden age that they propose to restore.

*Introduction*

So rush O Muslims and gather around your *khalifah* [caliph], so that you may return as you once were for ages, kings of the earth and knights of war. Come so that you may be honored and esteemed, living as masters with dignity. Know that we fight over a religion that Allah promised to support. We fight for an *ummah* [the worldwide community of Muslims] to which Allah has given honor, esteem, and leadership, promising it with empowerment and strength on the earth. Come O Muslims to your honor, to your victory. By Allah, if you disbelieve in democracy, secularism, nationalism, as well as all the other garbage and ideas from the west, and rush to your religion and creed, then by Allah, you will own the earth, and the east and west will submit to you. This is the promise of Allah to you. This is the promise of Allah to you.<sup>1</sup>

The declaration of a caliphate by the Islamic State in June 2014 revived debates on the nature of the caliphate itself, which had formerly seemed to be a topic of interest only to Muslim theologians and historians of the Islamic world. One key question was how a movement that emerged in a civil war environment in Syria (where factions among the Sunni majority sought the ouster of the minority Alawite dictatorship of Bashar al-Assad) and Iraq (where a Sunni minority was alienated from Shi'ite majority national government) could attract so many foreign Muslims to fight for it under the Islamic State banner. After all, civil wars sparked by fierce political grievances are common worldwide, but rarely attract enthusiastic foreign volunteers willing to die for them. But as Alexis de Tocqueville noted in regard to the French Revolution, movements claiming to be based on universal ideas transcend such boundaries and have a different dynamic:

By seeming to tend rather to the regeneration of the human race than to the reform of France alone, it roused passions

such as the most violent political revolutions had been incapable of awakening. It inspired proselytism, and gave birth to propagandism; and hence assumed that quasi religious character which so terrified those who saw it, or, rather, became a sort of new religion, imperfect, it is true, without God, worship, or future life, but still able, like Islamism, to cover the earth with its soldiers, its apostles, and its martyrs.<sup>2</sup>

As Tocqueville's reference to the rise of Islam indicates, before the late eighteenth century movements that inspired such widespread transnational mobilization had always been religious in nature, the most recent example being the rise of Protestantism in sixteenth century Western Europe and the political upheavals it produced. While succeeding movements of this type in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries (democratic, nationalist, or socialist) were all secular in origin, they did share something in common with similar earlier religious movements. Like their predecessors, they were future-oriented, proclaiming the promise of a new and better world once the corrupt old one was swept away. Whether religious or secular, all promised their followers an idealized future in which sacrifice today would be redeemed in a better tomorrow.

By contrast, the Islamic State is backward-looking. Instead of calling for sacrifice to create a new future utopia, it seeks to revive a structure long dead—the Islamic caliphate—interpreting it as the lost Muslim ideal that can be restored only by using past Islamic precedents as a strict template. No policy, law, or political strategy can be deemed legitimate unless it is grounded in the institutions and examples provided by the early Muslim state and its divinely guided leaders. In this process the Islamic State rejects the structure of the modern nation state system and seeks to replace it with a universal empire of religion, announcing that all existing state structures lose their legitimacy upon the arrival of the caliphate: “The legality of all emirates, groups, states, and organizations, becomes null by the expansion of the *khilāfah*'s authority and arrival of its troops to their areas.”<sup>3</sup> Like similar religious movements in the past,

it promises its followers either ultimate victory or the consolation of bringing the world itself to an end in a fiery apocalypse.

While literature on the caliphate is enormous, not enough attention has been paid to its recent re-creation as a variety of secondary imperial state formation in which the trappings and ideologies of long lost empires are used as a political tool to build a new one. Such “empires of nostalgia” draw on a strong cultural tradition of a perceived golden age that can be reclaimed now or in the near future. Only one of many types of secondary empire, empires of nostalgia have a distinct form that is rooted in very deep and specific cultural traditions whose appeal is usually a mystery to those who do not share it. Further, in the twenty-first century the Islamic State is not alone in appealing to nostalgia for vanished empires. In the wake of the Soviet Union’s collapse, Vladimir Putin now portrays Russia as the beleaguered defender of an Eastern Orthodox religious legacy inherited from the Byzantines, appealing to a peculiarly Russian cultural ethos that undergirds it. Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan has taken to reviving an appeal to the memory of the Ottoman Empire that the founders of Turkish Republic abolished and buried. The Communist Party heirs to Mao’s radical assaults on traditional Chinese culture now have a string of worldwide Confucius Institutes to market these formerly attacked values worldwide. Both empires and nostalgia are thus worth a closer look.

### *A world of empires: Primary and secondary*

Until the end of the First World War, empires were the most complex and dominant form of political organization in Eurasia, and had been so for more than two millennia. They had two distinctive forms that had different origins: large primary empires that were self-generating and self-supporting, and smaller (in territory or population) secondary empires that emerged in response to them. In some cases, overly successful secondary empires transformed themselves by evolving into primary ones, usually through campaigns of conquest and incorporation into a larger hybrid system.

Primary empires were states established by conquest that had sovereignty over continental- or subcontinental-sized territories that incorporated millions or tens of millions of people into a unified and centralized administrative system.<sup>4</sup> They financed themselves largely from internal resources through systems of direct taxation or tribute payments derived from their component parts. They maintained large and permanent military forces to protect marked frontiers and preserve internal order. Historically, primary empires were one or two orders of magnitude larger in territory and population than rival polities that (if they avoided incorporation) lived on their margins: regional kingdoms, city-states, or tribal confederations. Classic examples from Eurasia included the many empires that united China (Qin, Han, Tang, Ming, and Qing dynasties) over the course of two millennia,<sup>5</sup> the Roman and Byzantine Empires that long dominated the Mediterranean basin,<sup>6</sup> and the many iterations of the Persian Empire and its successor states on the Iranian Plateau and Central Asia.<sup>7</sup>

After the rise of Islam, the caliphate became a huge primary empire that ran from Spain and North Africa through the Arab Middle East and beyond into the Iranian Plateau and Central Asia.<sup>8</sup> Upon its breakup, successor primary empires eventually appeared in what had become the Islamic world. The largest and most long-lasting was the Ottoman Empire that first emerged in the thirteenth century and by the eighteenth ruled from the Balkans to the borders of Iran, from the Caucasus to the Arabian Peninsula, Egypt, and parts of North Africa. But other significant and long-lasting empires in the Muslim world that emerged around the same time period were established by the Timurids in Central Asia, the Safavids in Iran, and the Mughals in India.<sup>9</sup>

Such primary empires may have begun with the hegemony of a single region or ethnic group, but they all became more cosmopolitan over time with the incorporation of new territories and people very different from themselves. Indeed, the main characteristic of a successful primary empire was its ability to thrive on diversity and make it a strength. An important aspect of its political structure, one that gave it great stability, was that the empire's founding ruling elite could be re-

placed without bringing about the collapse of the state structure. Polities whose founding elites defined the state by their exclusive dominance of it lacked this capacity—they either had to limit the size of the state to one they could manage unaided, or risk its collapse at the hands of disaffected peoples whose own elites became permanent enemies of the state. The leaders of the early Islamic conquests experienced this tension firsthand when they broke away from a narrow conception of participation (Islam as a religion exclusive to the Arabs) to a strikingly diverse one (Islam as a world religion) in which all believers could potentially be part of a single political system in which there was an opportunity for a wide range of people to participate.

Empires were aided in this process by various types of long-term imperial projects designed to imprint particular aspects of their own cultural system on all peoples under their rule. It was not an attempt by the elite to create clones of themselves, but rather to foster a common core of values that would add to existing ones. It was a project that moved in stages from coercion and cooptation to cooperation and identification. It produced a vision of unity that extended well beyond force and created what we often identify as a civilization that long outlasted the political system that first produced it.

Examples include the use of Chinese ideographs and Confucian models of morality and governance in East Asia, or the survival of the use of Latin and Roman law and administration in the West. Religion could also prove a strong foundation for an imperial project in some parts of the world, as when the Romans and Byzantines began to see themselves as protectors and then missionaries for Christianity. Of course, the common use of the term “Islamic world” even today is a legacy of the founders of the caliphate whose project of making Muslim identity paramount over all others long survived that institution’s political collapse.

If classic primary empires were the product of internal development and sustained themselves through the exploitation of their own resources, there were also a large number of imperial polities that were the products

of secondary empire formation. That is, they came into existence as a response to primary imperial state formation elsewhere. Although they often had tremendous power and influence, and mimicked primary empires in their actions and policies, they lacked most of their essential attributes. Most notably, they often exerted direct rule over relatively few people, even when their geographical scope was huge. But the common element that really set all of them apart from primary empires was the absence of an internal domestic resource base sufficient to support the polity, and a dependence on external resources to make up that deficiency. Secondary empires acquired these resources in various ways, but always from people and states they did not attempt to rule directly. They were thus “shadows” that took on the form and power of primary empires without all of their substance.

There were four different types of shadow empires:

*Mirror empires* that rose and fell in tandem with their rivals because they were responses to challenges presented by a neighbor’s imperial centralization. The best examples are the series of nomadic empires in Mongolia that emerged when China was unified under native Chinese dynasties.<sup>10</sup> The danger China presented gave incentive for the nomads to unite, but these polities preserved themselves only by extracting resources from China, not by taxing their own people. Classic dyads included the Han/Xiongnu from 200 BCE to 200 CE and the Tang/Turks from 600–900 CE. When native Chinese dynasties collapsed, so did their nomadic counterparts that had become parasitically dependent on them.

*Maritime trade empires* that held the minimum amounts of territory needed to extract economic benefits from other polities that organized the production of the goods they traded. By focusing their investments on ports and strong navies, they attempted to control the means of exchange rather than the means of production. Examples include imperial Athens, Carthage, and Venice. In early modern times the Portuguese, Dutch, and British penetration of Asia took this form.<sup>11</sup> They were vulnerable to rival naval powers but tended to be shattered only when existing land-based powers were strong enough to either destroy their trade net-



works or target their centers for elimination, as when Rome destroyed Carthage or the Spartans defeated the Athenians in the Peloponnesian War.

*Vulture empires* that were created by leaders of frontier provinces or client states who turned the tables on their erstwhile imperial masters in times of political and economic distress by seizing control of parts of the old empires. They characteristically sought to adopt the cultural values and administrative structures of the primary empires they occupied rather than impose new ones. Although their systems of governance were less sophisticated than the imperial systems they replaced, the ability to preserve order in the midst of anarchy gave them a competitive advantage. Ironically, the more successful they proved to be at restoring order, the more they undermined the rationale for their rule. They historically lost power when the structure of the old regime and its indigenous elites recovered enough to exclude the interlopers. Examples of such vulture empires include most of the many foreign dynasties that ruled north China,<sup>12</sup> or the Nubians who briefly ruled ancient Egypt.<sup>13</sup> In other cases, vulture empires emerged as masters of weak secondary imperial polities that lay beyond the reach of bigger primary empires. These shadow empires, such as the Hapsburg dynasty in Central Europe or the Grand Duchy of Lithuania in Eastern Europe, incorporated neighboring marginal territories but never produced an overwhelmingly strong center to unify them.<sup>14</sup>

*Empires of nostalgia* were based on the remembrance of organizations past. They claimed an imperial tradition and the outward trappings of an extinct empire, but could not themselves meet the basic requirements of an imperial state such as direct control of territory, true centralized rule, or significant urban centers. Indeed, they often lacked the territorial size or population to justify their pretensions—as when rulers of former provinces of an old empire promoted themselves to imperial rank. Examples include the medieval Carolingian Empire established by Charlemagne and its long-lived successor, the Holy Roman Empire.<sup>15</sup> As Voltaire acerbically complained, the “agglomeration that was called and which still calls itself the Holy Roman Empire is neither Holy, nor Roman, nor an

Empire,”<sup>16</sup> yet it survived as an institution for one thousand years.<sup>17</sup> No better definition of a shadow empire of nostalgia could be had. As we will see, the caliphate has had a similar hold on the Islamic imagination.

Shadow empires in each of these categories could on some occasions evolve into true primary empires. The Mongol Empire founded by Genghis Khan in 1206 began like other mirror nomadic empires seeking only to extort northern China but ended up conquering it, and most of Eurasia as well, to become the largest land empire in history under his successors.<sup>18</sup> Few maritime empires successfully moved to directly rule the lands they exploited economically, but the expansion of the British in India from a group of private armed traders in the seventeenth century to rulers of the whole subcontinent in the mid-nineteenth is an example of how it could be done.<sup>19</sup> And while most vulture dynasties that ruled north China were never able to expand very far south, in 1644 the Manchu Qing dynasty did—quickly moving from vultures to become primary imperial rulers of all China for the next two-and-a-half centuries.<sup>20</sup> When secondary empires did transform themselves into primary ones, however, the legacy of their earlier experiences as outsiders often profoundly affected how they saw the world. Unlike native Chinese rulers like the Ming dynasty it succeeded, for example, the Qing treated non-Han peoples as potential partners to be co-opted rather than inveterate enemies to be walled off.<sup>21</sup> In South Asia, even after their de facto displacement of the Mughals and other powerful Indian states, the British were loath to take on the formal responsibilities of governance, and never lost their mercantile preoccupations that put profit first. Only after various forms of indirect rule failed and put their position in India at risk during the so-called Sepoy Rebellion of 1857 did the British government in London finally end the East India Company’s responsibility for administration there.<sup>22</sup>

### *Empires of nostalgia and cultural memory*

Of all the shadow empires, those based on nostalgia are perhaps the most unusual and the most shadowy. They exist only in the minds

of those who perceive them and are rooted in conceptions of empires past that never truly existed in the ideal forms that were attributed to them. Their origins were firmly rooted in the lasting cultural memory left by powerful empires on the regions and peoples they ruled or bordered. When these empires collapsed (particularly if that collapse resulted in many generations of political anarchy, population decline, and economic decay), the extinct imperial structure was often imbued with the aura of a former “golden age” now lost.

The memory of this empire and its trappings retained such an ideological hold over future generations that it could be used as a powerful tool in later times when new rulers sought to build states or empires of their own. It also provided many of them with templates for building a large-scale administration where these had disappeared. This tendency was strongest in China where the cosmological myth of a necessary emperor ruling “All under Heaven” emerged even before it was fully united, and later provided the impetus to recreate a united empire after it was lost.<sup>23</sup> Any conquerors who could reunite China after a period of disunion—even “barbarians” like the Mongols and Manchus—were deemed legitimate if they succeeded.<sup>24</sup> The founding myth of unity that came into being with the first Qin emperor in the third century BCE was so strong that (unlike in the West) primary empires succeeded in reuniting China after each period of state collapse. (Some today would see the People’s Republic of China as the latest in this series of unified Chinese states attempting to restore its former status as the dominant power in East Asia.)

China’s success in recreating imperial unity after collapse (periods that often spanned many centuries) was the exception rather than the rule, however. In most places the dream of reestablishing a primary empire in its past form always remained a distant hope rather than an achievable reality. Still, the very idea of the old empire provided an ideological basis for those leaders seeking to centralize power against the opposition of powerful local elites. Charlemagne’s Carolingian Empire fell squarely into this category because it lacked most of the basic necessities of state formation, let alone empire formation. Early medieval Europe lacked big

urban centers and an integrated economy. Its rulers could raise only rudimentary taxes and relied on feudal troop levies rather than standing armies. Indeed, the entire feudal system of land grants run by autonomous local notables was antithetical to Roman principles of imperial rule. These continued only in the Roman Catholic Church, whose hierarchical clergy and institutional ownership of land far better reflected a Roman imperial template.<sup>25</sup>

Still, it was recognized as an empire at the time, and continues to hold an outsized place in medieval European history. Why? Because it was the first widely accepted attempt to bring back the political model of Rome to the Catholic Christian West, and it struck a powerful cultural chord in regions that saw themselves as falling far below the level of civilization that had once existed. It would serve as a potent ideological weapon in the (ultimately unsuccessful) drive to centralize the petty states of feudal Europe into a single imperial polity, as well as later giving Western Europe an imperial vision of itself in dealing with the Islamic world during the Crusades.<sup>26</sup> It had far less of an impact in the territories of the Eastern Roman Empire where the Byzantines (allied with the Eastern Orthodox Christian Church) successfully maintained a unified imperial structure and centralized military for a millennium after its collapse in the West.<sup>27</sup>

In empires of nostalgia, rulers tied their own legitimacy to something that no longer existed but still attracted willing participation: the desire to be part of a political project that inspired hope of better things to come by appealing to past glory. Petty struggles for power and supremacy could be dressed in more attractive clothing and tied to loftier goals that had strong cultural appeal. Cooperation was thus easier to achieve, and recognition of the new ruler and his state as more legitimate, if it could be linked to an admired (if long gone) empire rather than being viewed as an unwelcome innovation imposed by a usurping power-hungry clique.

Because empires of nostalgia draw their power from the realm of cultural memory, they do not travel well. The West's infatuation with ancient Rome has little resonance in China, nor does the epic rise and

fall of Chinese dynasties stir any emotion in the West. Yet in their own realms, such remembrances of empires past can be tenacious. Indeed, it appears the only way to kill the nostalgia for one is to inculcate a new cultural order. While the model of Rome remained strong in the West, it was lost to Roman North Africa after the Islamic conquest. From that point on, people there were invested in empires of nostalgia drawn from the Islamic tradition. Few were more potent than the idea of the caliphate.

### *The caliphate and its new incarnations*

The most powerful empire of nostalgia in the Islamic world has always been the caliphate. Seen as a framework for governance sanctified by the Prophet and his immediate successors that began in the mid-seventh century CE, its early conquests were spectacularly successful. They laid the groundwork not only for a new imperial structure but one uniquely combining the Muslim religion and the state. Like most empires, its internal politics were fractious and not very edifying for either those who fell victim to them or later historians. Even as the empire expanded externally, it was divided by civil wars over who should rule the caliphate. The Umayyad Caliphate displaced those who were supporters of the heirs of the Prophet's son-in-law 'Alī b. Abī Ṭālib (who maintained a distinct identity as Shi'ites). The Umayyads ruled the caliphate until 750 when they were displaced by the Abbasids. The Abbasids consolidated their power in part by murdering all the Umayyad pretenders they could find. Despite its bloody beginnings, the Abbasid dynasty marked the highpoint of caliphal power and has long been viewed as the period of Islam's greatest influence culturally and politically. Its power declined in the mid-ninth century when it lost control of outlying territories and was challenged by many rebellions. The dynasty lost secular authority when conquered by new regional dynasties, beginning with the Buyids from Iran in 945. However, the prestige of the caliphate was so high that all succeeding Muslim dynasties acknowledged the caliph's spiritual authority. The caliphate ended when the Mongols sacked Baghdad in 1258 and murdered

the last caliph, abolishing the institution. Coming from a different cultural tradition, they had no particular respect or sympathy for Islamic institutions (although their descendants who stayed would eventually adopt the religion).<sup>28</sup> The Ottoman sultans, who first took up the title for themselves in the fourteenth century, began to stress the importance of the institution for their own legitimacy beginning in the eighteenth century, in a fairly successful bid to portray themselves as defenders of Islam against the growing power of Christian Europe.

While appeals to an idealized Islamic past had a long history, particularly in the battle to throw off European colonial domination in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, Islam as a framework for state-building had seemingly lost the battle of ideas to Western democratic, nationalist, or socialist movements that either rejected religion outright or reduced its writ to the private sphere. Such secular movements all sought to build ideal human societies of some sort and saw religion (of whatever type) as an obstacle to achieving their goals. Beginning first with the American and French revolutions in the late eighteenth century, religious institutions in the West were stripped of any privileged political role even in countries like Britain that still recognized a state religion. During the twentieth century, socialist states like the Soviet Union and the People's Republic of China attacked religious belief and religious institutions directly, proclaiming atheism as national policy. Following the end of World War I, most leaders of newly independent states in Muslim majority countries (or those seeking independence) similarly grounded their political legitimacy in a variety of secular rather than religious guises: nationalism, kingship, democracy, or radical socialism.

This can be seen most strongly among the secular nationalists who established all the regimes of the Arab world following the dismemberment of the Ottoman Empire (save Saudi Arabia). They viewed religion more as a source of the region's weakness rather than strength, and believed it needed to be cast aside to build state power. Non-Arab Muslim polities adopted similar policies of state secularism in pursuit of national development. In the 1920s, it was the core ideology of Turkey's Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, who abolished the caliphate in 1924 during his successful

drive to create a secular republic. Reza Shah Pahlavi attempted to modernize his country by stressing Iran's pre-Islamic greatness under the Persian Empire. Even in distant Afghanistan, King Amanullah Khan spent the 1920s attempting to replace a legal system based on Islamic law with secular courts employing a secular law code. A British Indian political agent at the time went so far as to conclude that the rise of secular modernist reformers was "an illustration of the broad fact already noticed that the impulse behind recent movements in the East is nationalist rather than religious in character, and that when the two forces come into conflict the advantage lies with the nationalist."<sup>29</sup>

Almost a century later, this conclusion appears to have been premature. Beginning with the Iranian revolution in 1979, the Islamic world has been swept by a revival of religious political movements in which the secular nationalists have been at a clear disadvantage. But the form such Islamic movements has taken has varied significantly. Some Sunni Muslim Brotherhood followers saw their movement as able to work within the structures of existing secular states, with the expectation of moving them toward such religious goals as the implementation of shari'ah law. Others sought to implement purely Islamic governments with no inclination to share power. In Shi'ite Iran, clerics set the rules of the Islamic Republic and oversaw its management. In the Sunni world, Mullah Omar, the Taliban leader of Afghanistan, proclaimed the country an independent Islamic emirate and gave himself the title of *amir al-mu'minin* (Commander of the Faithful) in 1996. Notably, however, he did not proclaim himself caliph, or suggest that the Afghan emirate marked the beginning of a new caliphate. In this he appears to have been following Al-Qa'idah opinion that a caliphate could only come into existence after the lands of the original caliphate (including places no longer Muslim, like Spain) had come under its control. Significantly, Mullah Omar was neither an Arab nor from the Prophet's tribe, qualifications historically deemed necessary for becoming a caliph (although these criteria had not applied during the many centuries when the Ottoman Turkish sultans claimed the title).<sup>30</sup>

The shift of the concept of the caliphate from some future culminating endpoint that would emerge only after Islam's final victory over its rivals to a contemporary institution designed to bring that victory became manifest in June 2014. At that time, the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) endorsed Abū Bakr al-Baghdādī's declaration of himself as caliph in the territories ISIS occupied. In sharp contrast to Mullah Omar, Baghdādī is both an Arab and a descendant of the Prophet's tribe of Quraysh. The large number of Muslim supporters, including thousands of foreign fighters and even women, who have flocked to join in the fight for this new caliphate has surprised many observers. Their enthusiasm for participating in a fight that is not their own is best explained by viewing the Islamic State and its declared caliphate as an "empire of nostalgia" that attracts precisely because it is an attempt to recreate a lost empire of glory when Muslims were politically and culturally dominant.

The original caliphate was a transnational empire, so those attempting to revive it now see themselves as legitimate in reaching out to the entire Muslim *ummah* for support. Like other purveyors of empires of nostalgia, however, its culturally resonant project is based on illusions designed to soften a harsher reality. The war the Islamic State portrays as a noble and attractive struggle pitting believers against unbelievers to create an ideal Islamic state is in reality a vicious civil war conflict within the Muslim community. Only by declaring its equally Muslim opponents (albeit of different sects or political factions) *kuffār* or infidels, apostates worthy of death (that is, *takfīr*), can the new caliphate justify its brutal tactics that bring mass slaughter and oppression to the heartland of the old caliphate.

In this, ISIS lays the foundation for its demise: successful empires succeed by tempering their violence through the accommodation of diversity. Power may be won by the sword, but it is maintained by softer means. As conquerors of large non-Muslim communities, rulers of the early caliphate needed to accommodate indigenous groups and accepted them as long as they accepted the caliphate's rule and paid taxes. By contrast, the current Islamic State works in an environment in which



Muslim communities constitute the vast majority. Ironically, some Christian communities have received better protection than their Muslim neighbors because the original caliphate granted them specific protections not shared by other religions (such as the Yazidis) or those fellow Muslims they have deemed heretical.<sup>31</sup> By defining its caliphate so narrowly, they risk the fate of similar radical Islamic movements such as the seventh-century Kharijites, who also viewed most other Muslims as enemy apostates. They were marginalized and destroyed by unified opposition to them in both the Sunni and Shi'ah communities.

Of all the varieties of shadow empires, an empire of nostalgia is least likely to make the transition into a primary empire. Even in China where new dynasties grounded themselves in older imperial traditions, that transition was only the finishing touch that transformed conquering rebels and foreign invaders into legitimate rulers. In this they resemble what anthropologists call revitalization movements whose charismatic leaders seek to bring about a social transformation of the world that would empower their followers.<sup>32</sup> To attempt the recreation of an old imperial structure on the ground, however, invites attack by rivals of all sorts that few such movements could withstand. Empires of nostalgia thus do best in a world where there are no powerful state rivals, in times when long periods of political turmoil produce a desire for order even where it cannot be delivered. Where strong states do exist, such movements are almost always destroyed as autonomous political entities, a prospect that often leads to the belief that divine intervention will save the day, as the ISIS Caliphate's English-language media mouthpiece asserts. Called *Dabiq*, it is named for the site in northern Syria where some believe the Muslim version of Armageddon will occur.

Notes

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4. This and subsequent sections of this article are taken directly from Thomas J. Barfield, "The Shadow Empires: Imperial State Formation along the Chinese-Nomad Frontier," in Susan E. Alcock, Terence N. D'Altroy, Kathleen D. Morrison, and Carla M. Sinopoli (eds.), *Empires: Perspectives from Archeology and History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 21–41.

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## Response to Thomas Barfield, “The Islamic State as an Empire of Nostalgia”

Franck Salameh

If I may, I wish to both agree and take issue with parts of Tom Barfield’s conclusion that ISIS is an “empire of nostalgia” seeking to recreate a lost “golden age.” This is an exquisitely accurate assessment, suggesting that an exercise such as ISIS may be “based on illusions” and may therefore prove to be ephemeral. By osmosis, this also diminishes the tenacity and resilience of the Islamic State itself, and devalues the legitimacy of its religious bearings.

However, such an assessment nevertheless ignores the tenacity and resilience of both empire and religion in the Middle East. For example, suggesting that secular nationalism as a principle and basis of government, as well as a source of political legitimacy, may trump other models in the Middle East ignores the staying power of these forces in the region.

To wit, even in presumably secular, modern Middle Eastern societies such as Turkey, more citizens readily identify as Muslims first and foremost than as citizens of a “secular” republic. Surmising otherwise is a reflection of post-religious Western biases, not time-honored Muslim norms. Furthermore, secular nationalism and the *pretense* of secular nationalism are not necessarily identical when it comes to ideas and political cultures of the Middle East: the former *may* be secular; the latter only *parades* secular ostentations.

And so, I would like to push back with two—perhaps combusive—suggestions to flesh out Barfield’s assessment:

First, that ISIS may indeed be the norm in the *longue durée* of Middle Eastern history, rather than the exception;

Second, that the secular state (particularly the current crumbling Arab-defined state system in the Middle East) is the exception to the rule, and may not have the staying power once attributed to it. In other words, places like “Syria”—and in some Western and pan-Arabist circles “Greater Syria”—or for that matter Jordan or Iraq and the rest, are modern inventions that never achieved legitimacy. ISIS, on the other hand, may hold both legitimacy and authenticity.

It is true that Muslim-majority countries (or some Muslim majority countries) in the Arab-defined Middle East might have trotted out secular ideals with great zeal throughout the twentieth century. But to suggest that, say, the Ba’ath in Syria and Iraq, or Nasserism in Egypt, or the *jamāhiriyyah* (socialist populism) of Libya, or the monarchies of Morocco, Jordan, and the rest (which, incidentally, all proudly flaunt their kings’ direct descent from the Prophet Muḥammad)—to suggest that the above somehow drew their political legitimacy, and therefore their staying power, from secular—as opposed to religious—principles and traditions, is to paint too bright and optimistic a picture of realities that may point into darker corners of Middle Eastern societies and history.

Government in places like Iraq, Syria, Egypt and the rest in the Arab-defined Middle East, in spite of their proclaimed secular attributes (which may be more meaningful to Western audiences than to locals) remain governments of deeply religious societies and political cultures, drawing legitimacy chiefly from religion—from Islam to be exact.

It is politically soothing for Western pundits (and the Western academy in particular) to diminish the centrality of religion in Middle

Eastern lives. Yet the political realities of the Middle East remain intimately entwined with religion. This is easily illustrated with one example from my own world of references.

In the mid-1970s, during one of the numerous fitful 'pinnacles' of Arab nationalist fervor that were then dismantling the Lebanese state (perhaps at that time the region's only non-Muslim entity outside of Israel), Syria's dictator Hafez al-Assad, in those days the leading man of "secular" Arabism, had to extort a *fatwā* edict from Lebanon's supreme Shi'a cleric, Mūsā al-Ṣadr, confirming the Alawites' Shi'ite Muslim pedigree—Alawites who incidentally wedded Phoenician paganism, metempsychosis, Christian Trinitarianism, and Greek and Gnostic conceptions of divinity to what traditional Muslims may consider only nominally, even dubiously, Islamic practices.

Now, why would Assad seek a religious affidavit shoring up his Muslim credentials if his prerogatives as a ruler stemmed from "secular" sources in an ostensibly secular, Arab nationalist Syria? Because in multi-ethnic, multi-religious, polyglot Syria, the "secular" Ba'athist state constitution still mandated that the president of the republic be a Muslim—and Assad was obviously, in the eyes of many, not considered a Muslim. Although this is only one example that confirms the rule across the board in the Middle East, there are many other parallels to it. One ought to try to be a Coptic Christian president of Egypt, for instance.

True, the Arab nationalism trotted out by Syria's Assad (and his Ba'athist clone in Iraq, and others elsewhere) had initially been a secular creed at its inception in the early twentieth century. But this early secular Arab nationalism was in the main the creed of Arabophone Christians, intelligible only to them and other non-Muslim minorities at the time. That is, secular nationalism was the doctrine of non-Muslims preoccupied with building a post-Ottoman polity for themselves where they would no longer be relegated to second-class *dhimmitude* (officially tolerated under Islamic law but sometimes subject to discriminatory rules and restrictions) living by the sufferance of a Muslim state, often enduring persecution, discrimination, and the indignity of a devalued existence. But a secular Arabism denuded of its Muslim content ultimately proved



unintelligible, and therefore unattractive, to the bulk of the Muslims of the late Ottoman period.

Even Michel Aflaq, the Damascene Greek Orthodox Christian founder of the Arab Ba'ath Party—a committed secularist by all accounts but nevertheless a Christian secularist—even *he* could not escape the centrality of Islam in his neighborhood, and the centrality of Islam to the secular Arab nationalism that he promoted. He conceded that being an 'Arab' and being a 'Muslim' were complementary, if not synonymous. From the time of the Prophet Muḥammad to the time of the prophet of Arab nationalism—Michel Aflaq himself *also* adopted the name Muḥammad in later years—during that time period, spanning some fourteen centuries, little has changed in the sense that identity and self-awareness under Islam have always been religious. So in a sense, not only is there no opposition between Islam and the so-called secular Arab nationalism of the modern Middle Eastern state system; indeed, there is a great deal of conflation, and harmony, and cooperation, and synonymity.

Secular Ba'athist doctrine as articulated by Michel Aflaq held that the Prophet Muḥammad was also, in point of fact, the founder of the Arab nation and was to be venerated as such by every Arab nationalist, whether Muslim or not. Indeed, Aflaq himself practiced what he preached and is believed to have converted to Islam.<sup>1</sup> He was anyway given a Muslim state funeral in Iraq in 1989.

There are many adages in the literature of Arab nationalism that confirm the fact that secularism as a source of legitimacy in the post-Ottoman, Arab-defined Middle East is at best a pipe dream that defies the region's laws of nature, which remain overwhelmingly defined by religion (which is to say, defined by Islam). For instance, a leading Iraqi Arab nationalist writer, 'Abd al-Raḥman al-Bazzāz, noted that Islam is the religion of the Arabs (and by the Arabs), *par excellence*. "There could in no way be a contradiction between Islam and Arabism," stressed Bazzāz.<sup>2</sup> Another writer from the same school agreed, maintaining that "Islam is the other face of Arabism."<sup>3</sup> Munāḥ al-Ṣulḥ, a prominent Lebanese Arab-nationalist theorist, confirmed his cohorts' attitudes, claiming

that "Islam is another name for Arab nationalism."<sup>4</sup> Even Michel Aflaq himself is noted to have claimed repeatedly that "Islam is to Arabism what bones are to the flesh."<sup>5</sup> But perhaps most significantly, the logo of the Arab League itself—an 'Arab' and not a 'Muslim' league, one ought to remember—is emblazoned with a fragment of a verse from Sūrat Āl 'Imrān of the Qur'ān, which reads: "You are the finest nation (*ummah*) that has been brought forth to mankind."<sup>6</sup>

So, in conclusion:

ISIS is indeed an "empire of nostalgia," but it is grounded in nostalgia that stands on solid historical ground—nostalgia that is to many more real than reality itself.

The brief "secular" interlude in the Middle East of the early twentieth century was exactly that: brief, and just an interlude. It was also the exception to the rule. The rule was and remains: empire and religion, tightly conjoined—a fusion that long preceded Islam, or even monotheism.

"Secularism" is an absurdity in the Middle East.

Empire (and indeed theocratic empire) can be said to be a Middle Eastern invention. From the time of the Sumerians to ISIS in our time, the pattern has been one of discontinuity and change, and many iterations of cultures and rulers; but empire in varied incarnations has remained unchanged, and Islam as a badge and rationale for empire has endured. ISIS is in line with that time-honored pattern. Islam, after all, to the majority of Middle Easterners (not only to the ISIS types) is the pinnacle of human existence; whatever came before Islam is not worth remembering, let alone preserving—and ISIS is making good on that principle. And whatever may come after Islam can never measure up.

Lastly, whether ISIS endures or not, *that is not the question*. What matters is that ISIS is here; perhaps not here for long, but it has been here long enough; it is demolishing cultures and peoples and monuments that withstood and stood the test of time.

And today, in the year in which many commemorate the hundredth anniversary of the Armenian Genocide, one may be rightly concerned with the fate of millions of Middle Easterners under the gun, Muslims and non-Muslims alike. One may be concerned with the fate of tens of thousands of Middle Eastern migrants escaping the violence of their homelands, strewn about in rickety boats adrift around the Mediterranean. These are moving images and compelling causes for concern! And yet, the collapse of the Middle East and the destruction of Near Eastern Christianity and Christendom continue unabated.

Debaters and demagogues and pundits and pedagogues deliberate with zeal and clarity and alacrity about ISIS and the causes of ISIS and the life-expectancy of ISIS, while Christians in the Middle East (others as well, of course others, but disappearing Christians and non-Muslim minorities in the main) are stalked by a looming gruesome end, wondering how much longer they will be able to hold out. Conferences and academic papers and attempts at understanding, and all the jeremiads and condemnations and righteous indignations and analyses that follow, may all be well and good! Yet little else beyond the academic and the perfunctory is being done! Little else perhaps *can* be done! And the breviaries of the victims and the hunted grow longer! And all that is offered ultimately remains a creepy form of modern voyeurism: looking at the atrocities, flinching with horror, getting offended, and then moving along social media circles, avidly scrolling further down Twitter feeds.

Crucifixions, beheadings, victims burned alive, others buried alive, and on and on and on. This ought not be the eighth century! Our modern calendars assure us we live in the twenty-first century. We all know that. But we all also live in a smug post-religious, post-imperial Western bubble, and assume the rest of the world does so too, or *ought* to.

In March 2015, at the behest of France, the United Nations Security Council debated the possibility of a UN “Action Charter” aiming at protecting Near Eastern Christians (and other indigenous endangered species) from the cruelty of ISIS.<sup>7</sup> Some clamored to suggest this was a fantastic initiative! Better than nothing, they claimed! In reality—and beyond the fact that it never amounted to anything—France’s was an initiative sadder and more ominous than reality itself. It marked the last chapter in a long-standing saga of destruction, signaling a sort of resignation in the looming extinction of one of the founding elements of human civilization—the non-Muslim “first nations” of the Near East—and the rise of an empire that to many Westerners may be deemed archaic, obsolete, and cruel, but which to many Middle Easterners is *not* totally bereft of legitimacy, authenticity, and historicity. ISIS may indeed be an “empire of nostalgia”! But its yearned-for “secular” alternatives are perhaps a cross between *Candide* and *Pollyanna*, and we may indeed currently be living in the middle of “the best of all possible worlds.”

## Notes

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6. Q 3:110: *kuntum khayr ummatin ukhrijat liʾl-nās*.

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# ISIL and the (Im)permissibility of Jihad and *Hijrah*: Western Muslims between Text and Context

Tazeen Ali and Evan Anhorn

## *Abstract*

In this paper, we draw attention to the ways in which theology operates within, and indeed proceeds from, generative social contexts. Beyond a concern for correct interpretation of scripture, categories of religious permissibility and impermissibility are socially constituted—they define boundaries of inclusion or exclusion that establish specific relationships to hegemonic Western societies. To examine these relationships, we will consider the charismatic critique of the Islamic State, as well as the institutional response of North American Muslim scholars, through an analysis of textual interpretations for the obligation of *hijrah* (emigration) and jihad proposed by the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) and its supporters.

Drawing from Weber's analysis of charisma, we contend that the ideology of ISIL and its style of argumentation play upon Muslim anxieties over their national belonging in the West. This resonance is seen through a close reading of the ISIL promotional magazine *Dabiq* and the way in which its authors imagine their Western audiences. Against ISIL's claims, the argument for the impermissibility of this jihad by leading Western Islamic scholars and organizations such as the Council on American-Islamic Relations (CAIR) is also considered. In the North American construction of an Islamic legal discourse on the impermissibility of joining

ISIL, Muslim minorities' anxieties over national belonging are again highly relevant. We argue that, while coming to opposite conclusions, both Western Islamic scholars and ISIL ideologues rely upon constructions of Western Muslim anxiety as much as the Islamic tradition for staging their arguments. These legal arguments can only be understood by contextualizing these debates as a part of a broader contest over Islamic authority and institutionalization in the West.

*Introduction: Charisma and the Islamic State's critique of Western society*

On June 28, 2014, Abū Muḥammad al-ʿAdnānī, spokesperson for the jihadist organization Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL), declared the group's creation of a global Islamic caliphate.<sup>1</sup> This announcement coincided with the first issue of the new state's propaganda magazine, *Dabiq*, and the first day of the month-long Muslim festival of Ramadan, a holiday marked by Muslims around the world with fasting and repentance. The Ramadan launch date was meant to be highly symbolic for the declaration of the Islamic State in *Dabiq*. Mirroring the spiritual invitation of Ramadan, the first issue of *Dabiq* calls for a return, repentance, and reform to match the earthly restoration of the Islamic caliphate—at once a political, religious, and social answer for a divinely sanctioned pattern of human life and governance.

It is important to bear in mind the close relation of the Islamic State to its media apparatus. While *Dabiq* is explicitly conceived as a recruitment device, it is not the only manner in which Western Muslims are called to personal and political restoration. By its very nature, the idea of the Islamic State is itself *daʿwah*—a universal call to all Muslims. Lacking an historical people, established borders, or a cultural heritage, the global caliphate is as much an appeal for an ideal utopian society as it is for a functional political state with boundaries, infrastructure, and the rule of law. The first issue of *Dabiq* relates the following part of the declaration speech:

O Muslims everywhere, glad tidings to you and expect good. Raise your head high, for today—by Allah’s grace—you have a state and Khilafah, which will return your dignity, might, rights, and leadership... Therefore, rush O Muslims to your state... O Muslims everywhere, whoever is capable of performing hijrah (emigration) to the Islamic State, then let him do so, because hijrah to the land of Islam is obligatory.<sup>2</sup>

The language of the speech is clear: the Islamic State is where Muslims truly belong. Indeed, it is the *only* authentic place of belonging for Muslims, since it alone is able to offer the leadership, dignity, and might that is the true, divinely ordained inheritance of Muslims. In this way, the Islamic State exists in an ideal form—as a charismatic appeal for a potential world. As Max Weber argued, it is not the recognition of a charismatic authority here that validates that authority; rather, true charisma, as Weber conceives it, needs no external validation. Its truth is such that recognition is merely owed to it from the world.<sup>3</sup> The failure of some (or even most) to tender this recognition is immaterial to the charismatic claim to authority—it is simply the failing of the world to appreciate the truth, something which then serves to further bolster the tight bonds of the charismatic group. As an engendering idea, as a creative and charismatic impulse, the Islamic State demands recognition—a duty that is left to the rest of the world to fulfill. For non-Muslims, the form of recognition is fear, as evinced in *Dabiq*’s regular articles devoted to the statements by Western leaders regarding the growing threat posed by the Islamic State. For Muslims, the form of recognition is immigration—to respond to the call to abandon life in the West and join the Islamic State, thus recognizing its claim to legitimacy, its leaders’ authenticity and authority as inheritors (*khulafā*’, the plural of *khālifah* or caliph) of prophetic leadership. The obligation of immigration, then, proceeds from a *charismatic appeal* of recognition and is not hampered in the least by the obverse case: the relative rarity of Muslim immigration to the Islamic State and thus the dearth of recognition. In this ideal form, recognition



is a duty; the Islamic State is not dependent upon the support or attitudes of others. Failure to recognize the Islamic State does not imply the failure of the State—rather, it is a failure or fault within our-selves (whether Westerners, Muslims or—most intriguingly—Western Muslims).

Understanding the charismatic nature of *Dabiq*'s call for immigration is critical to understanding the obligation of *hijrah*. For Weber, pure charisma seeks to overthrow any established social order, setting itself in diametric opposition to stable, routinized society and economy.<sup>4</sup> As Weber argues, the rationalized social and economic order is challenged by charisma precisely because “by its very nature [charisma] is not an ‘institutional’ and permanent structure, but rather, where its ‘pure’ type is at work, it is the very opposite of the institutionally permanent.”<sup>5</sup> Yet, as S. N. Eisenstadt has highlighted, in Weber’s thinking, charisma is also foundational to building new institutional orders, so that there is a reciprocal relationship between the charismatic appeal and the institutionalization it seeks to create.<sup>6</sup> This is because, as Weber argues, the original basis for the stable social and economic arrangements of society lies in an original charismatic moment that establishes a new precedent for provisioning the needs and demands of the society.<sup>7</sup>

In its “purest” type, this distribution takes the form of gifts and war booty, which are apportioned according to the pure whim of the charismatic leader. This alternative to the economic organization and provisioning of stable society becomes one of the primary vehicles for the charismatic movement to challenge the stable social order. Yet as the movement stabilizes, the charismatic caprice of the former mode is slowly replaced by increasingly bureaucratic and routinized forms, which seek to provision the needs and demands of the society members in a manner that is more organized and predictable over time. Yet the initial charismatic impulse lies at the foundation of new institutions and social arrangements. As Eisenstadt argues elsewhere, institutions retain the capacity to return in part to their original charismatic impulse, as new entrepreneurial figures seek to bring reform and renovation to ossified and stagnant social institutions.<sup>8</sup>

In this way, just as oil revenues fund the Islamic State’s admin-

istration, charisma finances the very construction and operation of the command to immigrate, and sets the claims of the Islamic State into a certain relationship with the West. As a charismatic regime, the Islamic State is imagined to be the very antithesis of Western stability and bureaucracy, whose routinization and standardization stifle the creative impulse that is essential to the charismatic worldview. In order to achieve the utopian vision of the Islamic State, the call to immigrate demands complete abandonment of the West—it is either Us or Them, either the revolutionary charismatic calling or the ossified social structure of the West. To immigrate is not to move from one country to another. It is to abandon a habituated social order in favor of the limitless potential of a conceptual frontier.

It is in this context that the third issue of *Dabiq* constructs the Islamic State's claim of immigration over Western Muslims. The issue's feature article, entitled "Hijrah from Hypocrisy to Sincerity," lays out the psycho-social realities of immigration.<sup>9</sup> Here, the author seeks to address the putative barriers that might impede young (and pronominally male) Western Muslims from leaving the West, including the relative safety, economic security, and educational opportunities represented by Western life. In so doing, the author presents an idea of the West in contrast with an idea of the Islamic State, suggesting what it might mean to belong to either.

In this way, the personal safety of life in the West is neither emulated nor ignored in the Islamic State, but rather turned on its head, so that the promise of pure death in martyrdom is the celebrated opportunity of the charismatic regime. This immediate and intimate access to the charismatic world is essential to the Islamic State's claims to subvert the rigid, impersonal, and bureaucratic life of the West. Similar themes of immediacy are carried through the article's critique of the "modern day slavery of employment," which is contrasted with the right of war booty (including enslavement) as the prophetic inheritance of all Muslims.<sup>10</sup> Again, the economic security of Western society is not denied; rather, the purity of the one who "eats from... his sword" is extolled, contrasting the impersonal wage-labor of Western economies with the

unique and personalized rewards of the charismatic economy.<sup>11</sup> Finally, the article does not deny the opportunities for education—even Islamic education—in the West, but instead invites Western Muslims to apply their knowledge in the building of a new world.

Each case celebrates the experience of immediacy allegedly found in life under the Islamic State—an ideal place where one breaks from the rigid, impersonal, and hierarchical life of the West—without denying the purported (if equally idealized) experience of life in Western society. As commentators standing outside of that social order, the authors of *Dabiq* are nevertheless responding to it, which can be seen in the very construction of the obligation for *hijrah*. While invoking Islamic texts and narratives, the charismatic call and authority of the Islamic State articulated in *Dabiq* is thus intimately connected with Western society as it is imagined by the authors, who then articulate their Islamic alternative in direct relation to the West.

### *Performing American Islam: The “Open Letter to Al-Baghdadi”*

In late September of 2014, in a speech addressed to the UN General Assembly, Barack Obama called upon Muslims all over the world to “explicitly, forcefully and consistently reject the ideology of organizations like al-Qaeda and ISIL.”<sup>12</sup> Around the same time, in an interview with CNN’s Christiane Amanpour, John Kerry also asserted that Muslims worldwide would be required to “reclaim Islam” in the greater campaign against ISIL.<sup>13</sup> Elsewhere both Obama and Kerry explicitly attempted to attenuate, at least verbally, the relationship between Islam and ISIL. For example in his official statement on ISIL, Obama, channeling the same sentiments expressed by George Bush following the September 11 attacks, insisted that the perpetrators of violence were “not ‘Islamic’” and even remarked that the majority of ISIL targets have been Muslim.<sup>14</sup> Much to the surprise and dismay of many commentators, Kerry went a step further and insisted on calling ISIL by the pejorative Arabic term “*Da‘esh*” (a derogatory name for the group based on the acronym derived from its name in Arabic) on the basis that the group’s actions “are an insult to Islam” and therefore

should not be called Islamic.<sup>15</sup>

At best, these efforts by American political leadership to make clear a distinction between Islam and ISIL are well-intentioned, and presumably meant to assist Muslim communities across the globe who might be unfairly associated with violent groups such as ISIL. However, we argue that the sharp imperatives laid out by Obama and Kerry for Muslim communities worldwide to denounce violence enacted by ISIL actually reinforce associations between “Islam” and ISIL in public perception in the United States. By requiring all Muslims to disavow the violence of groups like ISIL, there is an implicit notion that, in essence, there is indeed a link between extremist groups and Muslims unless otherwise noted. Moreover, when the most powerful American political figures construct such a linkage between *all* Muslims and ISIL, there are significant implications for Muslims in the West. For American Muslims in particular, the seemingly innocuous imperatives made by Obama and Kerry signify that being a part of the American public discourse requires the adoption of certain rules and parameters that have been dictated for them. For example, public discussions over ISIL are restricted to what Islam and the Qur’ān do or do not say about topics such as violence, jihad, slavery, and women’s status. This in turn means that American Muslim leaders can only respond on those same terms. They are required to engage with questions of religious interpretation rather than discuss foreign policy, free market capitalism, and the marginalization of Muslims in the West, all factors that inform the current situation in Iraq and Syria.<sup>16</sup>

Obama and Kerry represent the hegemonic discourse that establishes what issues are at stake and which questions are of significance. In this context, Western concerns about each and every act of violence perpetrated by Muslims are almost always dictated in religious terms. What is expected of American Muslim leaders, then, is to conform to these expectations by providing a religious response to ISIL. By providing Islamic counter-arguments to the kinds of claims articulated in ISIL publications such as *Dabiq*, as mentioned earlier, and restricting the discussion solely to matters of religion, American Muslims are forced to

accept the rules of the debate. In other words, American Muslims are compelled to acquiesce to a discourse that not only emphasizes religion and theology but also effaces socio-political and material conditions as viable causal factors to understanding the phenomenon of ISIL.

Furthermore, in performing the role that is expected of them, we argue that American Muslims are actually participating in another debate entirely, namely about the legitimacy of Muslim belonging in the United States. Here it is helpful to draw on David Scott's concept of the "problem space" which is defined as

... an ensemble of questions and answers around which a horizon of identifiable stakes (conceptual as well as ideological-political stakes) hangs. That is to say, what defines this discursive context are not only the particular problems that get posed as problems as such (the problem of "race," say), but the particular questions that seem worth asking and the kinds of answers that seem worth having. Notice, then, that a problem-space is very much a context of dispute, a context of rival views, a context, if you like, of knowledge and power. But from within the terms of any given problem-space what is in dispute, what the argument is effectively about, is not itself being argued over.<sup>17</sup>

According to Scott, a "problem space" comprises a specific set of issues that make up the framework of a given debate. This framework is defined by particular questions and answers that are dependent upon various networks of power. However, within this framework of questions, the real topic at hand is not itself acknowledged in explicit terms. For instance, the structure of the American debates over ISIL is determined by the hegemonic power of politicians and mainstream media. In this case, figures such as Obama, Kerry, and even CNN's Don Lemon—who earnestly inquired if American Muslim human rights lawyer Arsalan Iftikhar supported ISIL—set the terms of the debate from their positions of power.<sup>18</sup> Specifically, they require that Muslims respond to queries on

ISIL through the lens of religious commitments and affiliation.

Obama and Kerry both singlehandedly put the burden of responsibility on all Muslims to condemn what is considered “Islamic extremism” as a necessary component of overcoming this complex global phenomenon. Accordingly, in the televised interview with Iftikhar referenced above, Lemon insistently expected him to explicitly articulate his personal position on ISIL. It was not sufficient that Iftikhar had spent the previous five minutes arguing that all Muslims should not be personally held responsible for terror attacks, in the same way that Christian leaders are not asked to be accountable for acts of violence perpetrated by those with a Christian background. Nor did Iftikhar’s background as an international human rights attorney qualify him to be perceived as someone who would naturally be appalled at the actions of a group such as ISIL. Iftikhar’s responses were not considered acceptable precisely because they did not fall within the parameters of the debate. These are clear examples of Scott’s questions and answers “that seem worth asking... and worth having.”<sup>19</sup> The only questions and answers that are deemed worthwhile in this context are whether or not all Muslims (and in particular, American Muslims), as people who purportedly share a faith with violent groups, agree with the ideology of ISIL. Furthermore, an endorsement of ISIL is apparently the default stance of all Muslims unless explicit and public apologies and/or condemnations are made (and sometimes *despite* this). Applying David Scott’s concept of the “problem space” to American debates about ISIL, then, we argue that these debates are not *really* about the permissibility of jihad and emigration in Islam, nor are they centered on the qur’ānic stance on violence or warfare. Rather, these conversations mask the real issue at stake, which is whether or not Muslims can ever truly belong in North America.

This renders the Muslim role in the West performative, in that it functions as a way to lay claim to American belonging. This role is evidenced through what is popularly known as the “Open Letter to Al-Baghdadi” issued by over 120 prominent Muslim scholars worldwide, including representatives from key North American Islamic institutions such as CAIR, ISNA (Islamic Society of North America) and Fiqh Council

of North America, Zaytuna College, ADAMS Center in DC, as well as a few Islamic Studies professors from US institutions. The letter was released on September 24, 2014 and spans seventeen pages of text, with versions available in Arabic, English, French, Turkish, and Persian.<sup>20</sup>

The letter is intended by its authors to be a dense and meticulous refutation of the ideology of ISIL. It draws exclusively, albeit superficially, on the classical legal tradition, *ḥadīth*, and Qurʾān in order to delegitimize the Islamic State. The first sections of the letter draw heavily on classical legal tradition (specifically that of the Shafiʿite school) in order to establish scholarly privilege in scriptural interpretation. As such the letter and its signatories emphasize knowledge of *uṣūl al-fiqh* (exegesis) and a thorough command of Arabic as qualifications needed to quote the Qurʾān to advance a particular position. This is in contrast to the preferred interpretative method of ISIL as seen in *Dabiq*, wherein any reader can pick up the text and interpret verses in isolation. To this point, the Open Letter asserts that “it is not permissible to quote a verse, or part of a verse, without thoroughly considering and comprehending *everything* that the Qurʾān and *Hadith* relate about that point.”<sup>21</sup>

According to Nihad Awad of CAIR, who presented the letter in a press conference in Washington, DC, the letter was meant to dissuade potential recruits from emigrating for the purposes of jihad. Awad further states that the letter “is not meant for a liberal audience” and that some mainstream Muslims may not understand it either.<sup>22</sup> However, we contend that the outwardly complex legal argumentation renders it inaccessible to any potential ISIL recruits as well. Furthermore, the inaccessibility of the letter in our view is a part of the American Muslim performance that emphasizes religious and theological argumentation at the expense of a discussion of socio-political context surrounding the rise of ISIL. The most accessible part of the letter is its executive summary, which comprises twenty-four bullet points, each corresponding to a longer section within the body of the letter. The presence of this executive summary, we argue, signals that the very format of the Open Letter itself appears to be intended for a Western, non-Muslim public. Executive summaries are a standard feature of business and journalistic reports, and not

typically utilized in either traditional or contemporary Islamic legal texts.

Interestingly, twenty-two out of these twenty-four points incorporate the statement “it is forbidden in Islam” or “it is permissible in Islam.” For example, point eight reads: “Jihad in Islam is defensive war. It is not permissible without the right cause, the right purpose, and without the right rules of conduct.”<sup>23</sup> However, John Kelsay demonstrates the complex ways in which “right conduct” in jihad can be accommodated in multiple contexts, thereby extending the purview of “defensive war” and also allowing for the possibility of offensive jihad.<sup>24</sup>

Furthermore, we argue here that these definitive statements treat “Islam” as a monolithic entity with a singular stance on various issues, which in many ways is the very same critique that the letter directs towards ISIL ideologues. In fact, the letter’s usage of multiple singular statements on Islam contradicts point four that refers to the allowance for differences of legal opinion within the classical tradition. The signatories of the letter argue for the legal pluralism of Islam, while simultaneously claiming that ISIL is unequivocally “un-Islamic.” These contradictory statements indicate that despite the appearance of complex legal reasoning, the Open Letter only superficially reflects the classical tradition.

Moreover, despite Awad’s assertions to the contrary, the “Open Letter to Al-Baghdadi” does not, in fact, engage deeply with classical religious texts and scholars. It may appear this way to the casual observer because it is laden with technical language and vague invocations of prominent classical scholars. However, the outward complexity and inaccessibility of the letter to Western audiences do not suffice to render it an accurate portrayal of the classical legal tradition. Here, the Open Letter actually mirrors the superficial rhetoric employed by ISIL in *Dabiq*, which is also laden with references to classical scholars.

For example, in the second point of the letter regarding the centrality of Arabic linguistic expertise, the authors of the letter contend that mastery of Arabic grammar, syntax, and morphology is required to understand legal theory. The letter then makes a distinction between *khilāfah* and *istikhlāf*, in order to argue that the latter term signifies settling in a



particular place, rather than rulership. As such, ‘Adnānī’s failure to distinguish between the two terms in this same way in his declaration of the ISIL caliphate is cited as a grave linguistic error that stems from his lack of command of Arabic.<sup>25</sup> The letter thus dismisses ‘Adnānī’s declaration that the caliphate is a reference to the Qur’ānic injunction of “God’s promise” as an inaccurate interpretation of the Qur’ān. However, in our view, this dismissal does not actively engage with the fact that ‘Adnānī is a native Arabic speaker of Syrian background, and according to Shaykh Abū Turkī b. Mubarak al-Bin‘alī, one of the leading authorities cited by ISIL for its legal rulings, he is indeed learned in the religious sciences. According to a statement published online by Shaykh Bin‘alī, ‘Adnānī memorized the Qur’ān at a young age and went on to study *tafsīr*, *ḥadīth*, and *fiqh*.<sup>26</sup> On this basis, ‘Adnānī’s credentials would, in fact, appear to fulfill the scholarly prerequisites as specified in the letter to engage in the interpretative exercise of *ijtihād*.

Furthermore, multiple sections of the letter draw on Abū ‘Abd Allāh Muḥammad b. Idrīs al-Shāfi‘ī’s (d. 820) teachings in a selective manner when it bolsters particular claims against the legitimacy of ISIL. It appears to gloss over and omit selections of Shafi’ite teachings that might, in fact, support ISIL’s claims. For example, drawing on David Vishanoff, Kecia Ali describes “linguistic ambiguity” as a key element of Shafi’ite legal theory. Ali and Vishanoff demonstrate that Shafi’ite hermeneutics allow jurists to interpret texts in multiple ways, even while championing a singular interpretation as objectively true in accordance to divine intent.<sup>27</sup> This indicates that the very same Shafi’ite hermeneutic that is advanced in various parts of the Open Letter could conceivably be used to advance certain aspects of ISIL ideology.

The appearance of complex legal reasoning in the letter constructs an authentic neo-traditional style of argumentation by drawing on the classical sources, which by necessity is lengthy and somewhat inaccessible. This very inaccessibility, however, appears deliberate, because it ultimately serves to persuade non-Muslim audiences of its authenticity. As Awad said in the press conference, “the letter will still sound alien to most Americans... it is using heavy classical religious texts and classical

religious scholars.”<sup>28</sup> Yet, the letter publicly demonstrates moderate Western Muslims actively taking control of their tradition’s narrative, and performing the role that is expected of them by figures such as Obama and Kerry. This performative aspect of the letter is further played out on the Internet. The letter has its own website where users are invited to add their signature to the letter, and then publish their endorsement on Twitter and Facebook. This provides a way for Western Muslims to publicly condemn ISIL through their personal social media accounts with the authoritative backing of respected religious scholars. This highlights that public condemnation of ISIL is the requirement established for Muslims by the hegemonic discourse.

Awad further contends that the letter “is not meant for a liberal audience,” but rather for those might be attracted to ISIL recruitment.<sup>29</sup> However, we argue that this Open Letter is indeed meant for a Western liberal audience. Most of the points in the executive summary appear designed to allay specific Western anxieties about ISIL. For example, point seven clearly states, “it is forbidden in Islam to kill emissaries, ambassadors, and diplomats; hence it is forbidden to kill journalists and aid workers.”<sup>30</sup> This is in direct reference to the killings of the two American journalists, James Foley and Stephen Sotloff, and British aid worker David Haines, who are all mentioned in the letter by name. Foley, Sotloff, and Haines were hostages of the Islamic State who were all beheaded only a few weeks prior to the release of the letter, and so at the forefront of public consciousness. Their executions are described as “unquestionably forbidden (*haraam*).”<sup>31</sup> The inclusion of these British and American names as emissaries serves as further evidence that this letter is aimed towards a non-Muslim Western audience, given that there was no mention of the seventeen Iraqi journalists who had also been killed by ISIL in preceding months.

In highlighting some of the internal contradictions present in the “Open Letter to Al-Baghdadi,” it is not our intention to suggest that the authors and signatories of the letter are disingenuous in any way. Rather, we seek to emphasize that the superficiality with which the letter engages with classical religious argumentation in its refuting of ISIL confirms its

primary role in another debate, that is, the issue of American Muslim belonging. The chief purpose of the letter, in our view, is to argue for the legitimacy of Muslims in American society. While the authors of the letter may not necessarily be conscious of this masked debate, they are nonetheless actors who partake in this discourse of belonging. The rules of the hegemonic discourse as articulated by Obama and Kerry are such that any discussion of ISIL by Muslim leaders must necessarily address theology. American Muslim debates on ISIL and the demand that *all* Muslims must publicly condemn the Islamic State clearly demonstrate that Muslims must struggle to claim a place in American society that they currently do not have. We argue, then, that Western Muslim debates over the (im)permissibility of jihad and emigration to join ISIL are less about rival interpretations of Muslim legal texts and scripture, and rather speak more to the discourse of Muslim belonging in North America.

### *Challenging the Islamic State: Muslim institution building in the West*

Many key voices in American politics have responded to the ideological challenges of the Islamic State by emphasizing the role and responsibility of the Western Muslim community as the vanguard of an anti-Islamic State religious discourse. While some politicians have made efforts to draw public attention to the diversity of Muslim belief on issues of violence and terrorism, this strategy also runs the risk of alienating Muslims in the West, who are told that the expression of a vocal stance on the Islamic State is the criterion for their acceptance in the West (just as the Islamic State claims their hostile posture towards Western states and society is the criterion for their acceptance under Islam). Such strategies have done tremendous damage to the establishment of social trust by making narratives of conflict essential to narratives of belonging.

Given the charismatic claims of the Islamic State and the awkward social positioning of American Muslims, what might be a more constructive approach to promoting both civic participation and ownership of American Islam? For Weber, the charismatic orientation towards society arises out of “times of psychic, physical, economic, ethical, religious [or]

political distress.”<sup>32</sup> While Weber himself did not elaborate a great deal about these conditions, Eisenstadt has argued that this occurs when the rigidity of the prior social order fails to provide a sense of shared meaning and belonging to its members. Yet charisma is not only found in these moments of catastrophe; rather, as Eisenstadt has suggested, charisma plays a vital and productive role in much more mundane situations as well, particularly in reforming and transforming social institutions. For Eisenstadt, the original charismatic drive of the institution—which first led to its formation—provides later institutional actors with the resources to remap powerful symbols and reorient the institution to address new challenges in ever-changing social conditions. In this way, robust institutions are both the counterweight to claims of authority derived from pure charisma, as well as the filter through which charisma may be channeled into vital and sustaining social work. In the struggle to determine who speaks for Islam, then, Western Muslim institutions are ideally situated to contest Islamic State narratives primarily because they have recourse to the same charismatic potential.<sup>33</sup>

Productive examples might be drawn from Germany and the Netherlands, where the state has engaged with and even supported local Islamic institutions, resulting in greater access to civic and political participation for Muslim minority communities. As Ahmet Yükleven has argued, these institutions have played a central role in the process of integrating Muslim immigrant communities. Such organizations, Yükleven argues, vitally serve to “negotiate between the social and religious needs of Muslims, on the one hand, and the social, political, and legal context of Europe, on the other.”<sup>34</sup> In this way, the ability of German and Dutch Muslim communities to engage the state is largely determined by the successful establishment of the communities’ institutions. Comparing Moroccan and Turkish communities in the Netherlands, Yükleven notes that

Despite their similar numbers, Turks have 206 mosques, whereas Moroccans have 92. Turkish mosques provide social and religious services, whereas Moroccan mosques are limited to

ritualistic services. A higher level of religious institutionalization and functional diversity provides Turkish Muslims with greater negotiating power with the state.<sup>35</sup>

Due to a number of factors, including the relative degree of involvement of the Turkish and Moroccan governments, Turkish Muslim institutions have been much more successful than Moroccan institutions, which has resulted in different access to political and civic engagement in the Netherlands. In Europe, such institutions incorporate the dual functions of providing transparency for state regulation as well as meeting the needs of the religious community.<sup>36</sup> Moreover, these institutions are critical sites for remapping Islamic symbols to address new challenges and social change. As more Muslim refugees arrive in Europe, such institutions (and models of state-supported institutionalization) could provide vital resources for new communities, even as European governments increasingly put counter-productive pressure on these institutions to serve as vehicles for integration, assimilation, and state security policies.

While occupying a medial position between the demands of state regulation and the needs of the faith community, Turkish Muslim organizations in the Netherlands compete in a marketplace of religious institutions where they must leverage both the civic participation of the community as well as government support to come out on top. They navigate the political terrain and engage their communities in a way that is largely transparent, public, and pro-integration. By allowing dual citizenship and accommodating participation on the political stage, the Dutch program has produced a Muslim discourse on integration that is more participatory and cooperative. These Muslim groups, left to define their goals and participation in society, have formed into political-centrist organizations to take the most advantage of the democratic system. To build relationships between individual Muslim groups and political parties, such organizations have necessarily adopted a more inclusive Islamic message.

An alternative picture can be drawn from Germany, which also has a long-established Turkish Muslim population. While many of the same Turkish Muslim organizations exist in Germany, the state has adopted a very different approach to Muslim institution building—one that has been much less proactive in comparison to the broadly multi-culturalist approach of the Dutch. The government’s hesitation in supporting these organizations in Germany in part reflects the Turkish state’s involvement with the expatriate institutions. Many *imām* posts in German mosques are temporary positions filled by preachers trained and assigned by Diyanet, the Turkish ministry of religion. The centrally produced and disseminated Friday sermons (*hutbe*) of the visiting *imāms*, as well as the apparent ambivalence of Diyanet towards the integration of Turkish Muslims into European society, has spurred a deep current of suspicion between the German state and the Diyanet-associated mosques and organizations.

At other times, the German state has taken steps to incorporate Muslim organizations into the political process, for instance through the annual Deutsche Islam Konferenz (German Islam Conference) initiated by former Minister of the Interior Wolfgang Schäuble in 2006. The goal of the conference was to bring together German politicians and representatives of the Muslim community in Germany to discuss matters of integration and accommodation. Yet the state’s interest in the forum languished amid complaints that the conference had failed to produce a reasonably representative voice for Germany’s diverse Muslim population. In addition to demanding clearer accountability and consensus, the state also expressed concerns over the inclusion of Muslim groups that it had labeled as Islamist, including the same organization—Milli Görüş—which had made long strides in integration and institutionalization in the neighboring Netherlands. Eventually, the state moved to block the participation of Milli Görüş and others in the Islam Conference, which in turn frustrated other participating organizations and undermined the promising potential of the conference. By 2009, Schäuble had declared that “multiculturalism is not a solution” to integration in

Germany.<sup>37</sup>

The process of institutionalization is an important counterbalance to the claims of charismatic movements like the Islamic State. For Weber, although charisma breaks down the rules and order of society, it is also the origin of social institutions—the concretion of creative social visions first articulated in the charismatic annihilation of previous social orders. For charisma to survive the death of the charismatic founder, it must institutionalize into permanent organizations and structures, which then mediate and delimit the original charismatic vision. Yet the institutionalization of charisma never does away with the generative openness that lies at its core. Rather, as Eisenstadt has highlighted, there is a constant interplay between the “charismatic potentialities” of a social vision and the more organizational forms and processes that regulate and maintain it.<sup>38</sup> Charisma remains an important feature of the institution that lends it authority, while paradoxically allowing for change and transformation from within.

Despite the paranoia that often surrounds Muslim spaces in the West—frequently conceptualized as backwards, conservative, and dangerous in Western media—native Islamic institutions provide the most grounded challenge to the Islamic State’s charismatic claims.<sup>39</sup> Not only do local Islamic institutions furnish Western Muslims with an alternative model of religious integration and habitation that can compete with the narratives of the Islamic State, but more importantly, they provide a space for participation and social engagement that more directly serves Western Muslims’ need for social stability, cohesiveness, and community boundaries. Institutions provide access to resources and opportunities for their members that can be leveraged for advantage and gain. The nature of these advantages is determined in part by countless historical influences that shape the structurization of the charismatic institution. On the one hand, as the charismatic authority finds institutionalized, routinized expression, it must relocate itself within the existing society. On the other hand, in addition to these historical factors, the positive opportunities of the institution are also shaped by the original creative

ethos—the creative vision of authority and society as it emerged from the pure potential of charismatic authority.<sup>40</sup>

In all this, we must be careful not to read Islamic State claims with a naive understanding of the category of religion. It would be a mistake to dismiss the claims of the Islamic State as merely a thin pretense for political and material gain. One has to look no further than Weber's formative study of the emergence of capitalism in Northern Europe under the influence of Calvinist ethical and soteriological doctrine to understand that formal distinctions between religious and economic activity are not always possible.<sup>41</sup> At the same time, the recent *Atlantic* article "What ISIS Really Wants" or the New York Times article "ISIS Enshrines a Theology of Rape" run the risk of reducing the vast corpus of Islamic legal and exegetical texts to a selectively distorted formulation of "what Islam has to say about the matter," whether that matter is war, rape, or emigration.<sup>42</sup> Any such formulation would necessarily decontextualize positive statements by historical interpreters, while simultaneously ignoring the prolific literature that complicates or contradicts those statements. More importantly, as Kecia Ali has noted, such an approach turns a blind eye to the historical, social, and political realities of violence, and the interstitial spaces that breach and connect them.<sup>43</sup> Without carefully attending to the different ways in which violent actions and rhetoric emerge, including the social contexts within which violence is articulated or enacted, we jeopardize our opportunity to better understand it, as well as other forms of violence that were previously treated as *sui generis*.



## Notes

All digital content cited in this article was last accessed via the URLs provided in the notes below on November 16, 2020.

1. The authors presented an earlier version of this paper jointly at the conference *Global Halal* at Michigan State University in February 2015.

2. “Khilafah Declared,” *Dabiq* 1 (Ramaḍān 1435 [June-July 2014]): 7–11, 7.

3. Max Weber, “The Sociology of Charismatic Authority,” in *On Charisma and Institution Building*, ed. S. N. Eisenstadt (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1968), 18–27, 20.

4. This article draws from Weber’s later essays on charisma, originally edited and translated by H. H. Gerth and C. Wright in *From Max Weber: Essays in Sociology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1946), and later compiled in the 1968 volume edited by S. N. Eisenstadt cited above. Later in this article, we attempt to draw Weber’s analysis of charisma and institutionalization into the theoretical discussion of S. N. Eisenstadt. Where this is the case, we have endeavored to make the transition between Weber and Eisenstadt’s theories as clear as possible.

5. Weber, “The Sociology of Charismatic Authority,” 22.

6. S. N. Eisenstadt, “Introduction,” in Weber, *On Charisma and Institution Building*, ed. Eisenstadt, liii.

7. Weber, “Sociology of Charismatic Authority,” 18.

8. S. N. Eisenstadt, *Power, Trust, and Meaning: Essays in Sociological Theory and Analysis* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1995), 188–190.

9. “Hijrah from Hypocrisy to Sincerity,” *Dabiq* 3 (Shawwāl 1435 [July-August 2014]): 25–34.

10. *Ibid.*, 29.

11. *Ibid.*

12. “Remarks By President Obama In Address To The United Nations General Assembly,” The White House Office of the Press Secretary, Sep-

tember 24, 2014 (<https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2014/09/24/remarks-president-obama-address-united-nations-general-assembly>).

13. "Interview With Christiane Amanpour Of CNN," U.S. Department of State Diplomacy in Action interview transcript, September 24, 2014 (<https://2009-2017.state.gov/secretary/remarks/2014/09/232047.htm>).

14. "Statement by the President on ISIL," The White House Office of the Press Secretary, September 10, 2014 (<https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2014/09/10/statement-president-isil-1>).

15. Shadi Hamid and William McCants, "John Kerry Won't Call The Islamic State By Its Name Anymore. Why That's Not A Good Idea," *Brookings*, December 29, 2014 (<https://www.brookings.edu/opinions/john-kerry-wont-call-the-islamic-state-by-its-name-anymore-why-thats-not-a-good-idea/>).

16. For more on this discussion, see Mahmood Mamdani, *Good Muslim Bad Muslim: America, the Cold War, and the Roots of Terror* (New York: Doubleday, 2004). Mamdani discusses how in the wake of 9/11 and the War on Terror, a "good" Muslim was/is one who was secular and Westernized. We argue that American debates over ISIL and Muslim belonging in the United States are a different manifestation of the same trend: US discourse about American Muslims continues to define the boundaries of acceptable and unacceptable forms of religiosity.

17. David Scott, *Conscripts of Modernity: The Tragedy of Colonial Enlightenment* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2004), 4.

18. David Edwards, "Do You Support ISIS?: CNN'S Don Lemon Stuns Muslim Human Rights Attorney," *Rawstory.com*, January 8, 2015 (<https://www.rawstory.com/2015/01/do-you-support-isis-cnns-don-lemon-stuns-muslim-human-rights-attorney/>).

19. Scott, *Conscripts of Modernity*, 4.

20. "Open Letter to Dr. Ibrahim Awwad al-Badri, alias 'Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi,' and to the Fighters and Followers of the Self-Declared 'Islamic State,'" Council on American-Islamic Relations and Fiqh Council of North America, September 19, 2014. The document is available in a number of

different formats and translated into several languages at <http://lettertobaghdadi.com>. Here we will refer to the page numbers of the downloadable PDF of the English version.

21. "Open Letter to Al-Baghdadi," 3.

22. Lauren Markoe, "Muslim Scholars Release Open Letter to Islamic State Meticulously Blasting its Ideology," *Huffington Post*, September 24, 2014 ([https://www.huffpost.com/entry/muslim-scholars-islamic-state\\_n\\_5878038](https://www.huffpost.com/entry/muslim-scholars-islamic-state_n_5878038)). Interviewed on CNN on September 19, Awad promoted the letter as presenting a commonsense argument, stating that in it "we told them what every Muslim would tell them" (<http://edition.cnn.com/TRANSCRIPTS/1409/29/cnnt.01.html>).

23. *Ibid.*, 1.

24. John Kelsay, *Arguing the Just War in Islam* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2007).

25. "Open Letter to Al-Baghdadi," 3–4.

26. Shaykh Abū Turkī b. Mubarak al-Bin‘alī, "A Biography Of IS Spokesman Abu Muhammad Al-Adnani As-Shami," *Pietervan-ostaeyen.com*, November 1, 2014 (content archived at <https://web.archive.org/web/20161107011632/https://pietervanostaeyen.com/2014/11/02/a-biography-of-is-spokesman-abu-muhammad-al-adnani-as-shami/>). On Bin‘alī himself, see Cole Bunzel, "The Caliphate's Scholar-in-Arms," *Jihadica*, July 9, 2014 (<http://www.jihadica.com/the-caliphate's-scholar-in-arms/>).

27. Kecia Ali, *Imam Shafi'i: Scholar and Saint* (Oxford: One World, 2011), 67.

28. Markoe, "Muslim Scholars Release Open Letter to Islamic State."

29. *Ibid.*

30. "Open Letter to Al-Baghdadi," 1.

31. *Ibid.*, 6.

32. Weber, "Sociology of Charismatic Authority," 18.

33. Weber recognized three ideal types of legitimate authority, of which charisma was only one type. Yet Weber also recognized an interplay between different forms of authority. Following the death of the leader, charismatic authority undergoes a necessary process of routinization

whereby the teachings of the leader become standardized and codified, leading to the emergence of a more rational, bureaucratic, and institutionalized form of legitimate authority. Likewise, the anti-structural tendencies of charisma continue to play a key role in the life of the institution, providing generative grounds for reform and renewal. As Weber is careful to point out, these are modes of “pure” authority that are much more complicated and interwoven in historical practice. See Weber, *On Charisma and Institution Building*, ed. Eisenstadt, 46–65.

34. Ahmet Yükleyn, *Localizing Islam in Europe: Turkish Islamic Communities in Germany and the Netherlands* (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 2012), 42.

35. *Ibid.*, 42.

36. As Yükleyn has argued, some European Muslim institutions even compete with one another by leveraging their congregations to become more involved in social and political processes; Yükleyn, *Localizing Islam*, 204–211.

37. Rafaela von Bredow and Katrin Leger, “Schäuble zum Integrationsdebakel: ‘Multikulti ist keine Lösung,’” *Spiegel Online*, January 25, 2012 (<https://www.spiegel.de/politik/deutschland/schaeuble-zum-integrationsdebakel-multikulti-ist-keine-loesung-a-603306.html>).

38. S. N. Eisenstadt, “Charisma and Institutionalization in the Political Sphere,” in Weber, *On Charisma and Institution Building*, ed. Eisenstadt, 45.

39. Ebrahim Moosa, *What Is a Madrasa?* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2015).

40. In actuality, both of these are historically contingent, cultural criteria. It is partly this realization that led Eisenstadt to his critique of the theory of social differentiation, his understanding of multiple modernities, and his advocacy of a comparative-civilizational approach to the study of social-structural evolution. See S. N. Eisenstadt, *Comparative Civilizations and Multiple Modernities* (2 vols.; Leiden: Brill, 2003).

41. Max Weber, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, trans. Stephen Kalberg (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010).

42. Graeme Wood, “What ISIS Really Wants,” *The Atlantic*, March

2015; Rukmini Callimachi, "ISIS Enshrines a Theology of Rape," *New York Times*, August 13, 2015.

43. Kecia Ali, "The Truth About Islam and Sex Slavery History Is More Complicated Than You Think," *Huffington Post*, August 19, 2015 ([https://www.huffpost.com/entry/islam-sex-slavery\\_b\\_8004824](https://www.huffpost.com/entry/islam-sex-slavery_b_8004824)).

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