The History and Ideology of the Islamic State

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In 2015 a debate raged in policy and academic circles about whether it is appropriate to use the adjective "Islamic" when referring to the Islamic State and other militant jihadist groups like al-Qaeda. This polemic is centered on President Obama's unwillingness to use the word Islam in any form when discussing these groups. He does not want to dignify them, or their claims, by an association with the religion of Islam and the great civilization it fostered. Instead, the term of art for jihadists in Washington is "violent extremists," and the policy against groups like the Islamic State is called "countering violent extremism" or "CVE." While this label is inelegant, the White House has made what appears to be a prudential policy decision on how to contend with the jihadist phenomenon. It does not wish to offend Muslims, and even hopes to galvanize them to join the policy of CVE. After all, the overwhelming majority of Muslims does not agree with the Islamic State's ideology and views its ideologues and fighters as misguided and perverting both the message and image of the faith.

As a scholar of Islamic studies, my role—unlike that of the policy-driven politician—is to study groups like the Islamic State, to trace their claims historically and to explain their ideology and rise. To do so, it is important to see in what ways the Islamic State is tied to the history of Islamic theology and law, how it cites texts of revelation, and how it selectively appropriates and refashions the tradition of Islam for its political purposes. In addition, it is equally important to study the political, economic, and social context in which this jihadist group emerged. In other words, to ignore the Islamic background and content of the Islamic State's ideology or the material factors that led to its rise is to fail in the scholarly enterprise and to fall short in providing the policy maker, the student, *and* the public with an adequate understanding of the global phenomenon of jihadism.

So who are the jihadists of the Islamic State, what do they believe in, how and why did they emerge, and what do they want to achieve?

The Islamic State is a Jihadi-Salafi movement, which means that its members adhere to a strict literalist interpretation of the texts of the Quran and the sayings of the Prophet Muhammad. They privilege armed struggle (*jihad*) as a means for implementing their austere, intolerant, and muscular vision of Islam. Salafis—not all of whom preach armed violence; only the Jihadi-Salafis do—have been an influential minority sect throughout the history of Islam. In pre-modern times, Salafis were associated with populist movements, as when some of their scholars were rabble-rousers in 10th-century Baghdad or when in 18th-century central Arabia they led a revivalist movement better known as

Wahhabism (named after the founder of the movement, Muhammad ibn Abd al-Wahhab, who died in 1792).

Modern Salafis often claim that ordinary lay Muslims, whether in the past or the present, have beliefs and practices that are closer to a Salafi conception of the faith because of its "simplicity" and its attachment to a textual literalism that conforms with an "authentic" or "original" Islam. Much of Salafism's appeal lies in such assertions, and those searching for a locus of religious identity in our disenchanted modern world find a fully packaged version of the faith here. This claim, however, is not true on a number of counts, one of which is that in numerical terms most Muslims in pre-modern times were not Salafis; rather, they belonged to such traditional schools of law as Hanafism and were greatly influenced by Sufism—a mystical form of the faith at odds with Salafism—and the cult of dead saints associated with the Sufis. It is nonetheless true that in modern times, Sufism has declined considerably throughout the Islamic world and Salafism does indeed appear to enjoy widespread appeal. What explains this rupture with the past?

Salafism's ideology and worldview has come to the fore in modern times for a variety of reasons. Some of these have to do with the decline in stature of traditional institutions of religious authority as well as the spread of mass literacy and the personal desire of those not trained rigorously in the religious tradition to engage directly with the texts of revelation. Also, an urban middle class has arisen with particular expectations and desires, such as a personal sense of autonomy and a refusal to accept traditional hierarchies of learning and social status. (In this respect, what we see happening in the Islamic world is similar, though by no means identical, to the Protestant Reformation in Europe.) Finally, the funding of religious education by Salafi petro-states like Saudi Arabia has globally spread this literalist and textualist version of the faith.

Some have argued that petro-dollar financing alone explains the rise of Salafism, and if this funding tap was closed, the phenomenon would dissipate. While no doubt important, Saudi Arabia's funding is not a sufficient explanation for this religious revival, nor can it explain how so many Salafis, especially the jihadists among them, are virulent enemies of the kingdom. The blame attached to Saudi Arabia provides an overly simplistic narrative. The spread of Salafi teachings is rooted more in the needs and anxieties of modern Muslims—for greater religious certainty, for example—as well as with the emergence of new forms of authority, than in who is funding what. Moreover, people do not change their core beliefs and traditions purely for pecuniary reasons, and more is surely at stake when this takes place. Furthermore, those who posit the transactional model of Saudi funding for religious change never account for those who take the money but refuse to change or convert. Yemen, for instance, provides many examples of this phenomenon when people have accepted Saudi funding without changing their religious or political orientations.

Salafis principally target other Muslims for not following their version of Islam. They accuse their enemies of corrupting the faith with beliefs and practices that violate the doctrine of the oneness of God by associating other beings or things with Him. Many Muslims, Salafis argue, have become feeble because they have deviated into error and

lost the “true” message of the faith. Their grievance is about theological issues and the need for reform, but this quickly acquires a political and militant dimension with the Jihadis who are frustrated with the inability to effect change through nonviolent means.

Jihadi-Salafis adhere to an activist doctrine in which they show loyalty toward fellow brethren in the faith and exhibit enmity and militant hatred toward the unbelievers—this is called in Arabic *al-wala’ wa-l-bara’*. As a consequence of this, Shia and Sufi Muslims tend to be vilified by Jihadi-Salafis as unbelievers and often suffer violence. Of course, any self-proclaimed Muslim who supports democracy or a system of government Jihadi-Salafis deem to be un-Islamic is equally condemned as an unbeliever. To make their arguments, Jihadi-Salafis cite the most violent verses in the Quran and Hadiths of the Prophet Muhammad, and they also draw selectively on a pre-modern legacy of textual sources and methods of interpretation. By far the most important authority for them is the medieval Syrian scholar Ibn Taymiyyah (d. 1328), whose oeuvre represents an ideological bulwark against non-Salafi heresies. Yet, it must be stressed that Ibn Taymiyyah’s teachings were more sophisticated and nuanced than the teachings of those who claim to be his modern heirs in the jihadi community.

In the realm of politics, the Jihadi-Salafis condemn in categorical terms the modern world order because its values and principles are not rooted in Islam but rather in the infidel West. More specifically, according to them, the modern world has stripped God of His sovereignty as the sole lawgiver and also weakened Muslims by dividing them into territorial states whereby citizenship, not faith, is the basis for identity and allegiance. To make matters worse, the rulers of these Muslim-majority countries have been co-opted into this system and ultimately serve the interests of the dominant West. These rulers have thus become “apostates” who must be toppled. How to go about this task is a matter of dispute among the Jihadi-Salafis. Some, like al-Qaeda, argue that attacks against the United States—the superpower that supports these regimes—must be undertaken because they will provoke a military response from the U.S. that will ultimately radicalize Muslims. In contrast, the Islamic State favors controlling territory, building a state, and fomenting a civil war between Sunnis and Shia as the path toward a general radicalization and adoption of its ideology. For the Islamic State, the attack on the West is to be indefinitely deferred until victory locally, in the Arab world, has been accomplished. Lone wolf attacks, however, are encouraged by the Islamic State, and these have increased significantly as its military fortunes have declined of late in the Middle East.

The ultimate goal of the Jihadi-Salafis is to make Muslims as powerful as they once were, before the relatively recent dominance of the West over the globe. To do this, it is not sufficient to educate Muslims about the tenets of the faith; one must engage in acts of violence, both individual and collective, against the enemies. Only by terrorizing the enemy, including through the use of suicide bombing and mass slaughter, enslavement, and beheadings, can victory be attained. In addition, recreating the unitary imperial state of the early Islamic period, the caliphate, is deemed important because it can guide and channel the energies of the community and serve as an ideal around which Muslims can rally. This is one reason why the Islamic State declared itself the caliphate immediately after a series of remarkable military victories in Iraq in the summer of 2014.

The ideology described above is on display in countless online treatises and books written by the ideologues of Jihadi-Salafism. On the Internet, there are learned tomes and sermons by scholars such as Turki al-Binali, a 30-year-old prodigy from Bahrain who defends and elaborates the Islamic State's teachings with rhetorical eloquence and flair. Al-Binali's catechism-like treatises on theology and law are taught to all new recruits before military training is undertaken. But this ideology has become more effective and potent, especially at recruitment, because it is associated with what I label the culture of jihad. Unlike al-Qaeda, the Islamic State's supporters are masterful at producing technically sophisticated videos that are then skillfully distributed through social media applications such as Twitter, YouTube, and Facebook. And these are not just gory beheading clips, but include a cappella chants, poetic odes, scenes of battles interspersed with images of medieval knights on horses, clashing swords, and violent video game scenes. Particular favorites are clips from the movie *Kingdom of Heaven* as well as the video games "Assassin's Creed: Revelations," "Call of Duty," and "Grand Theft Auto." Joining the jihad has become cool and means that one can live in a reality that mirrors a virtuous, and sometimes even a virtual, past, which is a contemporary projection of a time full of righteousness, heroism, and justice. This sentiment is evoked by the so-called female poet of the Islamic State, Ahlam al-Nasr:

> Islam has become a fortress again; Lofty, firm and great
> The banner of God's Oneness is raised anew; it does not bend nor deviate

But no one should be fooled into thinking that the society and state established by the Islamic State is a perfect reproduction of the past, as its ideologues and recruits would want everyone to believe. Many of its practices and beliefs are innovations (e.g., a female-only morality police force) or constitute a distortion in the form of an amalgam of the old and the new (e.g., wantonly destroying archeological sites that represent no threat for the spread of polytheism and idolatry). A question the Islamic State avoids answering is why it should destroy such sites when the virtuous first generation of Muslims, who after all conquered these territories in the 7th century, did not see fit to do so. Finally, much has been made of the apocalyptic or millenarian character of the Islamic State's ideology. The argument is that the Islamic State is a harbinger of the end times in which the Muslims would be ultimately victorious over the forces of evil and unbelief. This aspect of the ideology is used for purely propaganda and recruitment purposes and is not to be taken seriously. A couple of factors guide my thinking here. Why is the Islamic State's English language magazine called Dabiq, a place in Syria in which one of the battles of the apocalypse takes place, whereas no such allusions are made so explicitly in its Arabic publications? Also, and more important, why does the Islamic State expend effort and funds in building state institutions, as it has been doing in both Syria and Iraq, when the end is nigh?

Thinking of the Islamic State in purely ideological terms offers only a partial explanation of the jihadist phenomenon in Iraq and Syria. To understand its emergence and appeal, one also has to look at the brutal political, economic, and social realities of the modern Middle East. Perhaps the most important factor in this regard has been the U.S. invasion

of Iraq in 2003. This assault on, and reconfiguration of, Iraq effectively disenfranchised the once dominant Sunnis and imposed a political system in which the majority Shia Arab population became the new masters of the country. Under the leadership of Nouri al-Maliki, the former Shia prime minister from 2006 until 2014, the Iraqi state pursued a sectarian agenda that marginalized and persecuted the Sunnis. In response, the Sunnis became radicalized and turned to the ideology of Jihadi-Salafism, with its virulent anti-Shia stance, as the path for resisting the new political order. The Sunni transformation toward militant Islamism was gradual and was aided by the Arab Spring uprisings of 2011, which quickly sowed violence and chaos in neighboring Syria. The Syrian Sunnis—some 70 percent of the country's population—had also been politically marginalized and since 2011 were being brutalized by the Damascus government, which is identified as Shia. The ruling Assad family, and most of its military and intelligence forces, belongs to a Shia sect called the Alawis or Nusayris. The Islamic State represents the merging of significant elements from the Iraqi and Syrian Sunni communities, with the aim of toppling the regimes in Damascus and Baghdad.

There are several other factors that also contribute to the Islamic State's appeal and help it draw recruits from across the Arab world, the source of most of its soldiers. Virtually every Arab country is ruled by a corrupt and unaccountable regime that practices coercion to obtain consent from the governed. These regimes have hollowed out their societies by deliberately destroying most forms of civic association, seeing in these potential sources of organized opposition to their rule. And the population in all Arab countries is very young, often with 60 percent under the age of 30—referred to as the youth bulge. Unemployment rates are high, and merit and competence are rarely rewarded. Obtaining work and advancement is often due to being connected to the right patronage network, a system that is referred as clientelist. The state is often the dominant employer and economic actor in society, and inability to obtain a job in the public sector dooms one to a precarious existence. Without employment, finding a marriage partner becomes very difficult, which delays the possibility of starting a family.

These economic impediments to development, both personal and societal, affect Arab populations that now have access to information through communication technologies such as the Internet and satellite television. Arabs know and see for themselves that other populations, in China or India for example, have it much better. This knowledge generates expectations, but for many individuals, it also causes considerable personal frustration and even hopelessness that they might ever improve their lot in life under the existing political systems. And to make matters even worse, the Arab world has four failed states (Libya, Syria, Iraq, and Yemen) in which all semblance of order has broken down. The Islamic State offers a utopian alternative, and its propaganda trumpets a social order that is just and moral and in which corruption is severely dealt with. A number of videos, for example, display Islamic State soldiers and officials being crucified for stealing.

The phenomenon of the Islamic State is multifaceted and its appeal is not straightforward. Its distinctive interpretation of Islam—the ideology of Jihadi-Salafism—cannot on its own explain its rise and relative success, nor can the political and economic realities of

the Arab world explain it either. Only by adopting multiple perspectives, which combine the ideological and the material, can one begin to understand how and why the Islamic State has risen and what its trajectory might be. Its goals lie beyond Iraq and Syria, inasmuch as its ideologues boastfully claim that world conquest and the establishment of Islamic rule everywhere is their ultimate aim. Its immediate aim is to consolidate power over the territory it now controls and to expand further in Syria and Iraq. Saudi Arabia, however, remains the ultimate prize, and the Islamic State has made no secret of its intentions to conquer the kingdom. Control over the two holy mosques in Mecca and Medina, not to mention the country's oil wealth, would go far in confirming the Islamic State's claims about its legitimacy and that it is carrying out God's plan.

The Islamic State will certainly not achieve any such dramatic conquest, and we are now beginning to see it suffer military defeat at the hands of a coalition that includes the U.S., Iraq, and Iran, among other nations. Thus far, it has only been able to take over Sunni-dominated territory and has not defeated either Shia or Kurds on their own ground. As it begins to lose battles and territory, the Islamic State's sheen will quickly fade. What will remain nonetheless are the factors that have allowed it to flourish in the first place, namely an ideology of religious power and domination as well as political, social, and economic realities that provide a wellspring of recruits and supporters who feel deeply disenfranchised and increasingly marginal to the flow of history. Only by addressing seriously these underlying causes and grievances will the phenomenon of jihadism be effectively dealt with. No amount of "countering violent extremism" through the U.S. government's messaging against Islamic State propaganda will turn this violent feature of global politics into a thing of the past.