

Understanding ISIS in order to Better Protect the Homeland

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Violent extremist groups like ISIL are not only a national security threat to the United States, but represent one of the major existential threats facing Islam today. Their distortion of primary, agreed upon texts and their fundamental lack of a coherent interpretative methodology, the hallmark of normative Islam, have led them to conclusions and interpretations that no other group in the vast intellectual history of Islam has ever concluded. While a confirmed minority of people in comparison to the over 1.4 billion Muslims worldwide, their media savvy has projected their evil far beyond their numbers and dominated discussions about Islam in the public square.

The urge to misinterpret various passages of the Quran and Hadith literature is something that the Prophet of Islam himself warned against. He famously said that a time will come when people will out worship you, but will have no understanding of the Quran.¹ This statement is profound on many levels and draws an extremely important distinction necessary to understand how exactly groups like ISIL distort normative Islam. This statement affirms the fact that there is a difference between religiosity and religion. Religiosity is the personal act of practicing one's religion. It can be measured in how much one prays, how much one gives to charity, how many days one fasts, etc. Yet this religiosity, the Prophet warned, can lead one astray without proper understanding, or proper religion. Understanding of religion, therefore, requires the study of religion, and like any sophisticated field of study, requires time and effort to arrive at the goal. It is this last point, perhaps more than any, which sets "us" apart from "them." Islam, in both its Sunni and Shia expressions, is marked by a very deep and sophisticated discursive interpretive tradition that contains three essential components:

1. Understanding the Divine text: the Quran and the sayings of the Prophet.
2. Understanding the current moment/context in which we live.
3. The ability and talent to link the two in a way that does not violate the meta principles of Islamic law which are the preservation of life, religion, intellect, property, and lineage.

¹ This hadith is found in the collection of Bukhari: 3364.

² Elgawhary, Tarek and Friedlander, Nuri trans., *Responding from the Tradition* (Louisville: Fons Vitae:

This process is a skill that requires proficiency of various areas of study, including many of the secular sciences to properly understand the current context. For example, Muslim jurists wishing to opine on certain financial transactions are required to know the nature of modern money (that it is fiat currency and not gold bullion, for example), the nature of modern financial transactions, the way risk is calculated, etc. If one were not to do this and relied only on medieval legal writings, one's opinion would be mismatched and potentially dangerous. This discursive, interpretive paradigm is what has allowed Islam to stay relevant in the face of great change. The 13th century jurist Imam al-Qarafi (d. 1258) reminded his fellow jurists that Islamic law changes with time, people, place, and circumstance. This implies that a jurist must understand the nature of these changing variables at all times.

Violent extremist groups like ISIL have no interpretive tradition, nor do they have a fundamental understanding of Islam whatsoever. They are unlettered warmongers who have, in essence, created a parallel religion and called it Islam. Yet, this parallel religion that they call to is no more Islamic than a pool with one lemon squeezed in it is lemonade.

The question remains, however, where does this thinking come from? In my research on this topic I have identified several central concepts that form the hallmark of their thinking, which are necessary to know if one seeks to develop an effective counter narrative. I will suffice with the three most major positions:

Takfirism

Takfirism is the process by which one is labeled an apostate due to some act or statement that is seen as taking one outside the folds of Islam. While classically understood as a matter for the courts and an extremely lengthy litigious process, violent and extremist groups usurp this authority for themselves and simply label any Muslim who does not agree with them an apostate. They then incorrectly conclude that since these Muslims who disagree with them are apostates, they have the right to engage in acts of violence against them due to their moral infraction, despite the fact that there is a universal prohibition against unjustly taking life (Quran 5:32). This line of thinking is not only unheard of in Islamic history; the Prophet never executed someone for leaving Islam², but also assumes that one can measure another's faith. However, the Quran clearly states in 2:256, "there is no compulsion in religion" as well as in 18:29, "whoever wills let them believe and whoever wills do not let them believe." The issue of religious freedom is clear as the light of day and no one has the right to attack anyone due to their choice in belief.

Ignorance of Society (Jahiliyya)

The second major intellectual underpinning of these groups is that Muslim societies are in a state of perpetual spiritual and religious "ignorance", a term used to describe the

² Elgawhary, Tarek and Friedlander, Nuri trans., *Responding from the Tradition* (Louisville: Fons Vitae: 2011).

polytheistic state of Arabia before the advent of Islam. While used throughout Islamic intellectual history to praise the pristine and equitable message of Prophet Muhammad to 8th century Arabia, violent and extremist groups argue that since we do not adhere to their warped way of thinking, the rest of us have slipped into a pre-Islamic age of ignorance and, using the aforementioned tactic, have essentially left Islam. This, again, is used as a justification for the use of force against innocents.

Ruling with God's law (Al-Hākimiyya)

While the previous two concepts serve as justification for an aggressive and exclusionary theology, the concept of ruling with God's law serves as the main justification for usurping political and military power. This concept deals with ISIL's misinterpretation of the Quran 5:44, in which it is clearly stated, "Whosoever does not rule with that which the Lord has revealed indeed they are disbelievers." When I sought to examine how Muslim jurists and theologians have understood this verse, I discovered that there is a consensus amongst the over 30 exegesis consulted, from the early generations of Muslims until the 21st century, that this verse refers to a person who rejects in totality and outright the corpus of Divine legislation (what we term Sharia) as a disbeliever. The verse does not mean, however, that if the Sharia is not used exclusively in state legislation that the entire state has apostated and therefore signals the green light to take rule by force.

Violent and extremist organizations like ISIL argue that what we typically refer to as Muslim nations are not in fact Muslim at all and their governments reflect the worst form of disbelief possible. What this thought process misses, however, is the fact that throughout the 19th and early part of the 20th century, Islamic law was codified in its various branches and written in modern, European legal format. So in fact, these nations that ISIL claim are not Islamic represent the best expression of contemporary Islamic legal thinking and the adaptability of Islamic law to modernity.³

The Common Thread

If the positions of groups like ISIL are so wrong and obvious violations of agreed upon interpretations, how then is that they have lasted as long as they have?

In the mid 1940s an obscure Egyptian literary figure visited the United States on an exchange program. In February of 1949, February 14th to be precise, Sayyid Qutub read of the news that the leader of the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt, Hasan al-Banna, had been assassinated. Mistaking American's observation of Valentine's Day for a national celebration of the death of the Islamist leader, Sayyid Qutub concluded that Islamism was his true calling. Completely untrained in the Islamic sciences, Qutub spent the rest of his life, until his execution in 1966, writing what was to become the main works and intellectual paradigm of the modern global Islamist movement. The three concepts described briefly above are profuse in his writings, most importantly in his commentary

³ Elgawhary, Tarek, "Restructuring Islamic Law: The Opinions of the Ulama Towards Codification of Personal Status Law in Egypt" (PhD diss, Princeton University, 2014), 83-86.

and reflections of the Quran *In the Shade of the Quran*. Every single violent and extremist organization claiming to adhere to Islamic principles since the middle of the 20th century have relied, in some cases exclusively, on the writings of Sayyid Qutub. For example, Muhammad al-'Adnani, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi's number two in command, spent 20 years pouring over Qutub's commentary of the Quran and proudly claims that he has attempted to write *In the Shade of the Shade*.⁴ These groups, fueled by the gross, misinformation posited by Qutub, have perpetuated these concepts and used their resources to slowly infect the minds of thousands.

It should be clear that not every extremist Muslim necessarily believes in all these issues. These concepts are porous and within the intellectual paradigm of extremism there is a great deal of fluidity. Likewise, it is possible that someone can hold some of these views without knowing how dangerous they are, nor leading them to actual acts of violence. This also means that there is a clear spectrum of extremist thought that can lead, but not necessarily, to violence and acts of terror. The solution, in my opinion, is education and literacy. Normative Muslim leaders need to be empowered to teach normative Islam that is grounded in the discursive, interpretative tradition outlined briefly above. Part of this instruction needs to be a clear and unequivocal counter narrative to help average Muslims understand *why* the narrative of ISIL and related groups is wrong. Until this happens in a mass way, the rhetoric of ISIL and related groups will only grow.

⁴ Al-Binali, Abu Sufyan Ibn Mubarak, *Al-Lafz al-Sānī fī Tarjamat al-'Adnānānī* (n.p., 2014), 3.