

ISIS: The Role of Ideology and Eschatology in the Islamic State

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Abstract

This paper examines the role of ideology and eschatology in the Islamic State. There are four main goals for this paper. First, to analyze the relationship between ISIS and AQC, and determine the dichotomy of their respective Salafi-Jihadist visions, particularly when it comes to the declaration of the Caliphate. Second, to determine the general Islamic nature of ISIS, and assess whether it is even legitimate to question whether or not they are Muslim. Third, more specifically, to examine the religious justifications ISIS utilizes to promote sexual slavery. The final goal is to analyze the role of apocalypticism and eschatology in the ISIS ideology. This paper concludes that the primary differences between AQC and ISIS come down to ideological disagreements regarding the timing of declaring a Caliphate, as well as whether or not to consider Shi'a Muslims legitimate followers of Islam. In addition, I argue that it is wrong to question the Islamic nature of ISIS, because only a Muslim can determine whether they are following their faith correctly. It is clear that the actions of ISIS are indisputably rooted in religion, at least in one interpretation, and that Islamic eschatological discourse has a strong impact on the organization. Whether or not ISIS leadership truly believes in apocalypticism is something out of the purview of this paper. Although religion had a significant role in establishing the legitimacy of the Caliphate, if ISIS continues to gain recognition as a real state, religion will likely become less relevant for the group.

The spark has been lit here in Iraq, and its heat will continue to intensify – by Allah's permission – until it burns the crusader armies in Dabiq.¹

Introduction

The emergence of the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) is something no one could have predicted prior to the 2003 US Invasion of Iraq. A combination of skilled former Iraqi military personnel, eschatologically savvy Islamic clerics, and an army of domestic and foreign fighters have created the ultimate terrorist pseudo-state. Formally splitting with Al-Qaeda Central (AQC) in 2014, the ideological and religious divergence between the two groups is rooted in Al-Qaeda in Iraq and Abu Musab Al-Zarqawi. The role of religion in the organizational dynamics and *raison d'être* of ISIS is a debate pertinent for controversy. This paper will examine the relationship between Al-Qaeda, ISIS, and its predecessors, and determine the ideological reasons for their deviation. It will also investigate the theological justifications for the actions of ISIS, as well as analyze the role of eschatology in ISIS theology. I will argue that Islam and ISIS are deeply intertwined, but that does not necessarily make ISIS the exemplar of Islam. ISIS generates theologically sound arguments to justify their actions and doctrine, and utilizes “End Times” theology and apocalypticism to legitimize its expansion and attract more recruits. The rising power of a terrorist organization and its transformation into a pseudo-state with borders is having and will continue to have catastrophic effects on the political, economic, and social welfare of the Middle East. Better understanding the underlying motivations for the group will help policymakers determine how to better combat ISIS.

This paper examines the role of ideology and eschatology in the Islamic State. There are four main goals for this paper. First, to analyze the relationship between ISIS and AQC, and determine the dichotomy of their respective Salafi-Jihadist visions, particularly when it comes to the declaration of the Caliphate. Second, to determine the general Islamic nature of ISIS, and assess whether it is even legitimate to question whether or not they are Muslim. Third, more specifically, to examine the religious justifications ISIS utilizes to promote sexual slavery. The final goal is to analyze the role of apocalypticism and eschatology in the ISIS ideology. This paper concludes that the primary differences between AQC and ISIS come down to ideological disagreements regarding the timing of declaring a Caliphate, as well as whether or not to consider Shi'a Muslims legitimate followers of Islam. In addition, I argue that it is wrong to question the Islamic nature of ISIS, because only a Muslim can determine whether they are following their faith correctly. The actions of ISIS are indisputably rooted in religion, at least in one interpretation, and that Islamic eschatological discourse has a strong impact on the organization. Whether or not ISIS leadership truly believes in apocalypticism is something out of the purview of this paper. Although religion had a significant role in establishing the legitimacy of the Caliphate, if ISIS continues to gain recognition as a state, religion will likely become less relevant for the group.

¹ Islamic State (ISIS, ISIL) Magazine: Dabiq - Issue 1, *The Return of Khalifa*, 1.

Relationship between AQI and AQC

In 2004, when Al-Qaeda in Iraq (AQI) was first established, Abu Musab Al-Zarqawi pledged *bayat* (allegiance) to Osama Bin Laden, but the group still primarily acted independently of AQC. Zarqawi's primary tactics implemented ideas from *The Management of Savagery*, a famous jihadist text that encouraged violent resistance to obtain one's goals.² He also utilized an intensely violent sectarian narrative, one that viciously opposed all Shia Muslims, considering them *kufirs* (unbelievers) and worthy of death. This culminated in the bombing of the Al-Askari mosque in Samarra in 2006, a significant Shia shrine and home to the remains of the 10th and 11th Shia imams, which erupted the entire nation into sectarian chaos.³ Zarqawi, after establishing the Mujahideen Shura Council, a collection of Iraqi Salafi-Jihadist groups, was killed later that year.⁴ A few months later AQI transformed into the Islamic State of Iraq (ISI), the immediate precursor to ISIS, led by Abu Hamza Al-Muhajir (also known as Abu Ayyub al-Masri), and Abu Omar Al-Baghdadi.

Zarqawi began to utilize *takfir* principles in order to justify the massacre of Shia Muslims in Iraq. *Takfir*, according to Stern and Berger, was "the pronouncement of someone as an unbeliever, and therefore no longer a Muslim."⁵ Ali Soufan argues that *takfiri* ideology found its modern-day origin in North African jihadists, where they "had been fighting their own regimes and therefore had to justify their terrorism and the killing of fellow Muslims in the process."⁶ In a letter to Bin Laden in 2004, Zarqawi wrote that Shia were "the insurmountable obstacle, the lurking snake, the crafty and malicious scorpion, the spying enemy, and the penetrating venom."⁷ Weiss and Hassan write that Zarqawi argued that Shia were "grave-worshippers, idolaters, and polytheists."⁸ Since the founding of Islam in the 7th Century, what once began as a political divide between Sunni and Shia had developed into significantly different theological doctrine and practice. The Shia worship of Muslim grave sites, often entombed with remains of historically significant Shia imams, is considered heretical to Salafists and caused them to be deemed *kufirs*. In a letter to Zawahiri, Zarqawi claims his initial goal was to provoke Shias into attacking Sunnis, which would then "awaken the inattentive Sunnis," to fight back and initiate a Civil War in Iraq.⁹

Osama Bin Laden was troubled by Salafi-Jihadist groups that tended to target Muslim civilians, regardless of whether they were Sunni or Shia. Stern and Berger cite an instance where Bin Laden withdrew his support of the Armed Islamic Group of Algeria due to ideological reasons surrounding their utilization of *takfir*.¹⁰ This is consistent with Soufan's argument that *takfir* originated with North African Salafi-Jihadist groups. However, the notion that a Sunni hatred of Shia is a new phenomenon is a misnomer. Weiss and Hassan quote a Saudi thinker who praised Zarqawi for "characterizing the Shia as part of a long uninterrupted line of perfidious collaborators dating back to the Mongol invasion of the Middle East."¹¹ Ibn Taymiyyah, a significant figure who pioneered the idea of a defensive jihad, is quoted as asserting, "[b]eware of

² Ibid., 23.

³ Ibid., 25; Al-Islam.org, "Shrine of Imam Ali."

⁴ Weiss and Hassan, *ISIS: Inside The Army*, 49; Ibid., 61.

⁵ Stern and Berger, *ISIS: The State of Terror*, 22.

⁶ Soufan, Freedman, and Kitzinger, *The Black Banners*, 12.

⁷ Weiss and Hassan, *ISIS: Inside The Army*, 28.

⁸ Ibid., 28.

⁹ US Department of State Archives, "Zarqawi Letter."

¹⁰ Stern and Berger, *ISIS: The State of Terror*, 22.

¹¹ Weiss and Hassan, *ISIS: Inside The Army*, 36.

the Shiites, fight them, they lie.”¹² Therefore, it is clear that a longstanding hostility towards Shia is prevalent among Sunnis, despite Bin Laden’s hesitance. Bin Laden felt that extreme violence causing the deaths of Shia and potentially even Sunnis would make AQC and AQI lose popular support of the masses, ultimately damaging their long-term goals.¹³ Bin Laden clearly placed a necessity for support for the wider Muslim *ummah* (community) far above ancient theological differences. Largely ignoring Bin Laden’s concerns, Zarqawi and AQI continued to augment its usage of suicide attacks against Shias and others in Iraq. Abu Muhammad Al-Maqdisi, an eminent Salafi-Jihadist scholar for Al-Qaeda, as well as Zarqawi’s mentor, also chastised his former student for his out-of-control tactics.¹⁴ This foreshadowed the widening gap between the ideology of AQC and AQI.

In 2005, Zawahiri sent a letter to Zarqawi admonishing him for his brutal tactics as well as advising him on how to win the Iraqi Jihad.¹⁵ He essentially wrote a treatise for his and Bin Laden’s goals for AQI, soon to be rebranded as ISI. He began the message praising Zarqawi for his successes so far, and then went on to outline the stages of a successful jihad in Iraq. First, AQI must work to eject the American military from Iraq, and once this occurs, to “establish an Islamic authority or emirate, then develop it and support it until it achieves the level of a caliphate.”¹⁶ He specifically referenced the necessity to fill the vacuum of power that will be left in Iraq once the United States leaves. Last is to extend jihad to Iraq’s neighbors, and amplify the struggle with Israel. He reiterated that the continuing mission of current Salafi-Jihadists in Iraq is to create an Islamic State and “defend it, and for every generation to hand over the banner to the one after it until the Hour of Resurrection.”¹⁷ Zawahiri’s mention of the “Hour of Resurrection” and therefore the “Apocalypse” is slightly out of character for leaders of AQC.¹⁸ Will McCants argues that “Al-Qaeda’s leaders rarely referred to Islamic End-Times prophecies in their propaganda and never suggested the *Mahdi* was just around the corner.”¹⁹ Bin Laden and Zawahiri apparently considered apocalypticism a “foolish pastime for the masses.”²⁰ Despite this, however, the ultimate goal of AQC’s jihad was to usher in the End of Times, as reflected by Zawahiri’s statements in his letter to Zarqawi.

Zawahiri argues that while waging jihad and creating the path to an Islamic State, the mujahideen must be exceedingly careful not to make mistakes. He believes that “the strongest weapon the mujahadeen enjoy is popular support from the Muslim masses in Iraq, and the surrounding Muslim countries.”²¹ Here he is essentially tiptoeing around a criticism of Zarqawi’s brutality in Iraq, implying but not assertively saying that AQI’s actions may lose the popular support of Iraqi Sunnis, and thereby doom the movement. He relates the mistake of the Taliban, who established an Islamic Emirate in Afghanistan but did not consider the needs of the people or engender any sort of loyalty first – causing the Emirate to collapse once the United States invaded.²² The ultimate purpose of the letter was to convince Zarqawi to stop slaughtering Shias

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Stern and Berger, *ISIS: The State of Terror*, 277.

¹⁴ Cook, “Apocalyptic Theorist and Apocalyptic Practitioner,” 13.

¹⁵ Stern and Berger, *ISIS: The State of Terror*, 22.

¹⁶ Combatting Terrorism Center at West Point, “Zawahiri’s Letter to Zarqawi,” 3.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Cook, “Apocalyptic Theorist and Apocalyptic Practitioner,” 4.

¹⁹ McCants, *The ISIS Apocalypse*, 28.

²⁰ Ibid., 28.

²¹ US Department of State Archives, “Zarqawi Letter,” 4.

²² Ibid., 5.

in Iraq. He asserted that the Shias cooperated with the American invasion and have helped the United States occupy Iraq. He also acknowledged the theological fallacies of Twelver Shi'ism and clearly believed it is a danger to Islam overall. However, he believed that the masses did not understand this theological divide.²³ Therefore, he argued that Zarqawi's attacks on Shias, although theologically and historically justified, would not be "acceptable to the Muslim populace," due to their ignorance, "and aversion to this will continue."²⁴ If Zarqawi would continue with his violent tactics against Shia, he might have lost support of the Sunni masses in Iraq, which would ultimately doom any Islamic Emirate that might be established.

The Ideological Split Between ISI and AQC

The catalyst for the split between ISI and AQC was the declaration of the merger between ISI and Jabhat Al-Nusra into ISIS in 2013.²⁵ After AQI transformed into the Islamic State of Iraq (ISI), the immediate precursor to ISIS, the group was led by Abu Hamza Al-Muhajir (also known as Abu Ayyub al-Masri), and Abu Omar Al-Baghdadi. Abu Bakr Al-Baghdadi soon followed as the new leader of ISIS. Despite Zawahiri's announcement nullifying the merger, Baghdadi doubled down and ignored the AQC leader, dangerously challenging his authority. Baghdadi accused Zawahiri of bowing to the Western powers, by him "insisting on a distinction between the lands of Syria and Iraq, was deferring to artificial borders drawn up by Western imperial powers at the close of the First World War [Sykes-Picot]."²⁶ By ensuring a division between the Al-Qaeda affiliates in Syria and Iraq, Baghdadi argued that Zawahiri was technically cooperating with the West. Weiss and Hassan maintain that when ISIS invaded Mosul and "bulldozed the berms dividing Iraq from Syria," it was a repudiation of Zawahiri's "prescription for holy war."²⁷

ISIS was able to steal fighters away from Jabhat Al-Nusra and continued to grow in power through fighters traveling from Iraq. In 2014 ISIS began to viciously fight other Syrian and Salafi-Jihadist groups, including Jabhat Al-Nusra. Ultimately this resulted in Zawahiri rejecting all connections between AQC and ISIS. When ISIS declared a Caliphate in June 2014, Zawahiri remained mostly silent, ignoring the growing threat of the Islamic State.²⁸ However, he did reassert the notion that Mullah Omar, the leader of the Taliban and the shadowy figure that Bin Laden had declared *bayat* to in the 1990s, was a legitimate proto-caliph.²⁹ The declaration of a Caliphate at this time contradicted the typical judgments of Bin Laden and Zawahiri, who believed in a long and drawn-out process of jihad before a state could be declared. Therefore, it is clear that Zawahiri was simply reacting to the disobedience of Baghdadi, illustrating the beginning of a power struggle that continues today.

Bin Laden was strongly influenced by Sayyid Qutb, a radical Islamist thinker from Egypt who has a strong impact on Salafi-Jihadist groups today.³⁰ Bin Laden, with inspiration from Qutb,

²³ Ibid., 8.

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Stern and Berger, *ISIS: The State of Terror*, 42.

²⁶ Weiss and Hassan, *ISIS: Inside The Army*, 185.

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Stern and Berger, *ISIS: The State of Terror*, 189.

²⁹ McCants, *The ISIS Apocalypse*, 129.

³⁰ Euben, *Enemy in the Mirror*, 54.

wanted to create a vanguard of Muslims to wage jihad and combat the *kufirs* in the West.³¹ However, Qutb believed that “the creation of an Islamic State and initiation of violent jihad is far off in the future, something that is not likely to occur in his lifetime,” and only after a protracted period of *da'wa*, or proselytization.³² He also argued for very specific steps, or milestones, that the vanguard must follow in order to correctly wage jihad and establish an Islamic State.³³ Bin Laden's emphasis on attacking the United States actually contradicted “Qutb's insistence on the significance of continuous *da'wa* before violence should take place,” and ignored Qutb's milestones.³⁴ Despite this, Bin Laden understood “the necessity to wait to declare a caliphate, the ultimate goal of jihad... The establishment of a global Islamic state is undoubtedly the ultimate goal of Al-Qaeda's jihad against the West, but the reality is distant in the future.”³⁵

Although they modified Qutb's timeline for violent jihad, Bin Laden and later Zawahiri knew that in the case of an Islamic State, patience was a necessity. If the Caliphate was declared too early and especially without popular support, it would crumble just like the Taliban's Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan. This notion reveals the primary distinction between AQC and ISIS, both ideologically and politically – when to declare the Caliphate. Youssef Aboul-Enein argues that many Islamic jurists believe that AQC had resorted to violent jihad too quickly.³⁶ If that is the case, it can be inferred that the same Islamic jurists would condemn the establishment of a Caliphate even more vehemently. Influential Salafi-Jihadist scholars such as Abu Muhammad Al-Maqdisi and Abu Qatada Al-Filistini asserted that the Caliphate was a “heinous conspiracy,” and that ISIS members were “simpletons who have deluded themselves with their announcement of the caliphate.”³⁷ To counter this, ISIS turned to a young Islamic cleric named Turki ibn Mubarak al-Bin'ali, who drafted a treatise explaining why the time was right to declare a Caliphate.³⁸ He argued that a Caliphate required “power, authority, and control of territory,” as well as a religiously qualified leader who met the requirements of a Caliph, all of which ISIS had.³⁹ Bin'ali successfully formulated the theological justifications for a declaration of a Caliphate.

Although Zawahiri may not have approved of ISIS's tactics, they were largely following the blueprint laid out for Zarqawi in Zawahiri's letter to him in 2005. He had specifically instructed Zarqawi to lay the framework for establishing an Islamic Emirate, with the ultimate goal of an Islamic State. Zawahiri's fault in his message is the fact that he did not clearly lay out an actual timeline for the stages he described. Zarqawi's AQI and its successors, ISI and ISIS, were able to utilize Zawahiri's blueprint for their own purposes. This is an ultimate consequence to Qutb's complicated and convoluted path to an Islamic State, despite the fact that he laid out milestones to guide the mujahideen. In order for Qutb's vision to succeed, “the Muslim population [should] be extremely cognizant of the specific steps Qutb set up for them, and [could not] stray from that path.”⁴⁰ However, Ahmad Moussalli maintains that “so many people cannot even read it [the Qur'an], let alone understand it or interpret it,” and therefore, ideological turmoil occurred as a

³¹ Aboul-Enein and Provider, *Militant Islamist Ideology*, 170.

³² O'Shea, “Sayyid Qutb's Influence on Al-Qaeda,” 103.

³³ Qutb, *Milestones*, 12.

³⁴ O'Shea, “Sayyid Qutb's Influence on Al-Qaeda,” 110.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 111.

³⁶ Aboul-Enein and Provider, *Militant Islamist Ideology*, 168.

³⁷ McCants, *The ISIS Apocalypse*, 128.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 116.

³⁹ *Ibid.*

⁴⁰ O'Shea, “Sayyid Qutb's Influence on Al-Qaeda,” 104.

result.⁴¹ Adnan Musallam argues that “Qutb’s writings were left open for radical interpretations of all kinds, which led many circles in the West since September 11, 2001 to dub him ‘the godfather ideologue of Osama Bin Laden, Ayman al-Zawahiri, and Al’Qa’eda,’”⁴² and now, it can be easily argued, of ISIS as well. Qutb’s radical interpretation of jihad became “an established fact of Islam,” and an inspiration for future generations.⁴³

The declaration of the merger of ISI and Jabhat Al-Nusra was clearly the initial stimulus for a disowning of ISIS by AQC. However, the deep ideological, political, and tactical differences between AQC and ISIS when it came to the establishment of the Caliphate, the killings of Shia’s, and the emphasis on the necessity for popular support in the media are ultimately what doomed the cooperation between the two groups.

The Islamic Nature of ISIS

Initial reactions to reading the name “Islamic State of Iraq and Syria” suggest that ISIS is blatantly and indisputably Islamic. Graeme Wood’s controversial article “What ISIS Really Wants” in *The Atlantic* puts forth a well-researched argument regarding the nature of the religious origins of ISIS.⁴⁴ He argues that ISIS justifies every action they carry out with theological justifications from the Qur’an and the Hadith. The Hadith is essentially a collection of the sayings of the Prophet, and is the “primary source of Muslim Law.”⁴⁵ The reaction to the article was one of widespread condemnation and criticism, especially among Muslim scholars. Jack Jenkins of *ThinkProgress.org* cites Professor of Islam Jerusha Tanner Lamptey as saying that Wood’s article “perpetuates the false idea that Islam is a literalistic tradition where violent texts are taken at face value.”⁴⁶ According to Lamptey, Wood implies that moderate Muslims may not be legitimate Muslims, because they do not follow ISIS’s literalist religious practices. This is where Wood truly falls short in his argument – he does not understand the fact that there can be an infinite number of possibilities for Islamic interpretation.

Islam, like many other religions, is a faith with a strong tradition of varied interpretation. An extremist version of Islam does not necessarily mean it is the correct one, or even the only one. This is what Jenkins and Lamptey challenge. Lamptey says, “Muslims who reject ISIS aren’t doing it because they’re bad Muslims. They just have a compelling version of Islam that they think is much better.”⁴⁷ This is an excellent quote that recognizes the true nature of ISIS ideology – it is an interpretation, one of many, of Islamic theology. But, rather uncomfortably, just because it is violent and unsavory does not necessarily make it any less legitimate than mainstream moderate Islam. In a speech at All Saints Church, Reza Aslan argued, “If ISIS is Muslim, and their victims are Muslim, and the people fighting them are Muslim, what does that actually say about Islam?”⁴⁸ If anything, it illustrates the vast number of different interpretations possible of the Qur’an and

⁴¹ Mawṣilī, *Radical Islamic Fundamentalism*, 222.

⁴² Musallam, *From Secularism to Jihad*, 172.

⁴³ O’Shea, “Sayyid Qutb’s Influence on Al-Qaeda,” 105.

⁴⁴ Wood, “What ISIS Really Wants.”

⁴⁵ Doi, *Introduction to Hadith*, 26.

⁴⁶ Jenkins, “What the Atlantic Gets Wrong.”

⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸ All Saints Church Pasadena, “Reza Aslan: The New Islamophobia.”

Hadith. He later asserts that “Islamic behavior is whatever a Muslim says Islamic behavior is,”⁴⁹ and in another speech said, “a Muslim is whoever says he’s a Muslim.”⁵⁰ This leads to the foundation for why declaring ISIS Islamic is such a convoluted and complex notion. The rituals and history of Islam are so intricate, so elaborate, so diverse, that solidifying the entire faith into one narrow interpretation, and then claiming that interpretation is the only legitimate one, is academically and religiously fraudulent. Therefore, it can be observed that the actions of ISIS may be theologically and morally sound according to Islam, while simultaneously being theologically and morally abhorrent. This is the reality of religious interpretation.

Even if ISIS claims to be Islamic as its name indicates, the identity of some of its members and those it allies with suggests otherwise. When Baghdadi initially rose to lead ISI, he needed to train officials in order to rebuild the organization. Stern and Berger write that “Although AQI and ISIS are motivated by an ideological commitment to reviving an Islamic state based on their understanding of Shariah, they formed an alliance with the former Ba’athists.”⁵¹ Many Ba’athists were formerly part of Saddam Hussein’s military and had “military and organization skills and a network of experienced bureaucrats that AQI and ISI lacked.”⁵² Therefore, ISI was willing to compromise its religious principles in favor of improved organizational dynamics and better training for its fighters. Weiss and Hassan assert that “the consequences of this sanctioning of an Islamist-Baathist alliance would be lethal and long-lasting.”⁵³ Similarly, in 2012 when ISI sent a representative to Syria to create Jabhat Al-Nusra, they also “reached out to forge relationships with groups with widely divergent ideologies.”⁵⁴ Once again, ISI, or in this case its partner at the time Jabhat Al-Nusra, was willing to compromise its apparently intransigent ethics to achieve its goals.

ISIS has had more success than previous Salafi-Jihadist groups convincing Muslims from the wider *ummah* of their legitimacy. One of the reasons for their success has been the Islamic credentials of their leader, Abu Bakr Al-Baghdadi. A native Iraqi born in Samarra, he received an MA and Ph.D in Islamic Culture and Sharia Law.⁵⁵ While imprisoned at Camp Bucca in 2004, his “PhD in Islamic studies conferred a jurisprudential wisdom on him to which squabbling jihadist inmates seemed to defer.”⁵⁶ He clearly had the Islamic qualifications to engender respect among his peers. In addition to this, however, his membership to the Quraysh tribe, the same as the Prophet Muhammad, lent him further legitimacy in his new role.⁵⁷ Baghdadi was a new and genuine source of Islamic authority that challenged even the leaders of AQC. Stern and Berger compare Al-Baghdadi’s academic credentials to Bin Laden’s and Zawahiri’s, those of business and surgery, clearly demonstrating Baghdadi’s scholarly Islamic superiority.⁵⁸ Therefore, once Baghdadi and ISIS declared a Caliphate in 2014, Muslims around the world heard his call and joined, using Baghdadi’s religious bona fides as an excellent source of justification.

⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁰ Rothkopf, “Aslan explains Islamophobes wrong ISIS.”

⁵¹ Stern and Berger, *ISIS: The State of Terror*, 38.

⁵² Ibid.

⁵³ Weiss and Hassan, *ISIS: Inside The Army*, 19.

⁵⁴ Stern and Berger, *ISIS: The State of Terror*, 42.

⁵⁵ Weiss and Hassan, *ISIS: Inside The Army*, 116; Stern and Berger, *ISIS: The State of Terror*, 34.

⁵⁶ Weiss and Hassan, *ISIS: Inside The Army*, 118.

⁵⁷ Ibid., 120.

⁵⁸ Stern and Berger, *ISIS: The State of Terror*, 39.

ISIS and Sexual Slavery

ISIS clearly has the motivation to declare itself Islamic, and has the leader to back up its claims with theological bases. But how the group utilizes this Islamic authority is another question. When ISIS took over the region of Sinjar, they massacred thousands of Yazidi men and forced thousands of Yazidi women into sexual slavery using religious justification. Several months later, ISIS published a justification in their English language magazine *Dabiq*. In an article titled “The Revival of Slavery Before the Hour,” they attempted to lay out a rationale for their enslavement of the Yazidi women.⁵⁹ They couple their justification with the idea that the reintegration of slavery into Muslim society is another sign of the imminent End Times. Yazidism is a syncretistic and monotheistic religion that believes that God created seven holy beings to watch over the Earth, the most important one being Tawsi Melek, or the Peacock Angel.⁶⁰ After the creation of the first human, called Adam, God requested the seven holy beings to venerate Adam, but Tawsi Melek refused and fell out of Grace with God.⁶¹ He subsequently repented and became the most significant figure in Yazidi theology.

This story has a striking resemblance to the Qur’anic tale of Satan, “And behold, We said to the angels: ‘Bow down to Adam,’ and they bowed down, Not so Iblis. He refused, and was haughty, and he Was of those who reject faith.”⁶² As a result, Muslims historically viewed Yazidis as devil worshippers, argued by ISIS in *Dabiq* – “The Yazidis present-day creed ... entails the worship of Iblis who they consider to be a fallen but forgiven angel.”⁶³ In addition, ISIS clerics concluded that due to the ancient existence of Yazidism, they should be considered pagans rather than apostates, and subsequently are permitted to be enslaved.⁶⁴ They continued to reference a number of Hadith that justify the enslavement of pagans. In the Qur’anic verse 4:24, although blatantly up for interpretation, warriors are supposedly granted permission to have sex with captives of war, provided that they are given to them by the government, in this case, ISIS itself.⁶⁵ In a pamphlet ISIS published on Twitter, ISIS writes, “It is permissible to have sexual intercourse with the female captive,” as per the Qur’anic verse 23:5-6.⁶⁶

Professor Bernard Freamon passionately attacks their reasoning, saying it is “plainly wrong, hypocritical and astonishingly ahistorical.”⁶⁷ He asserts that the Qur’anic reference to slavery is simply an acceptance of slavery as existing in the 7th Century. Freamon explains that the vast majority of verses in the Qur’an relating to slavery are in regards to their emancipation rather than continued enslavement. Robert Spencer of Jihadwatch.org counters, arguing that Freamon is misinterpreting those verses of the Qur’an and maintains that they do not call for the freeing of slaves, and subsequently provides further verses in the Qur’an that supposedly sanction slavery.⁶⁸ This lively debate is further proof of the vast differences of interpretation in the

⁵⁹ Islamic State (ISIS, ISIL) Magazine: *Dabiq* - Issue 4, *The Failed Crusade*, 14.

⁶⁰ YezidiTruth.org, “What is the Peacock Angel?”

⁶¹ Yezidis International, “The Yezidi People: Religion.”

⁶² Ali, *The Meaning of Holy Qur’an*, 25.

⁶³ Islamic State (ISIS, ISIL) Magazine: *Dabiq* - Issue 4, *The Failed Crusade*, 14.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 15.

⁶⁵ Ali, *The Meaning of Holy Qur’an*, 192.

⁶⁶ Middle East Media Research Institute, “Su’al wa-Jawab fi al-Sabi wa Riqab.”

⁶⁷ Freamon, “ISIS says Islam justifies slavery.”

⁶⁸ Spencer, “CNN falsely claims Islamic law.”

traditions of Islam. In the case of a justification for sex slavery of Yazidis, ISIS provides a well-reasoned argument rooted in Qur'anic tradition.

The Role of Eschatology in the ISIS Business Model

Although ISIS utilizes religious theology for much of their daily actions and rituals, the role of eschatology in the ISIS business model is paramount. Islamic eschatology is convoluted and confusing; there is a massive divide historically between Shia and Sunni eschatological tradition. The two sects often conflict in their End Times theology, and both concur and contradict with mainstream Jewish and Christian eschatology. Apocalyptic writers adapt to the world's current events – some considered the creation of Israel the initiation of the End Times, others argued it was the 1967 War, and others still believed it was the 2003 US invasion of Iraq. These are just recent examples – Muslim scholars have been conforming their apocalyptic narratives to historical circumstances for centuries, including the fall of Constantinople to the Ottomans as well as the Westernization of the Turkish state.⁶⁹

McCants cites Jean-Pierre Filiu as arguing that Sunnis looked down on apocalypticism since the origins of Islam.⁷⁰ This is consistent with Bin Laden's and Zawahiri's condescending impressions of those who believe in the mythology. However, the 2003 Iraq War dramatically changed the idea of apocalypticism in Sunni theology. McCants argues that “the U.S. Invasion of Iraq and the stupendous violence that followed dramatically increased the Sunni public appetite for apocalyptic explanations of a world turned upside down.”⁷¹

Muslim apocalyptic literature is largely based on Hadith, rather than the Qur'an itself.⁷² David Cook chronicles a common step-by-step process for the initiation of the apocalypse and the appearance of the *Mahdi*, a mysterious figure that has historically been enormously significant for Shi'ism in particular, but largely ignored in Sunnism.⁷³ The first significant figure in this common End Times narrative is known as the *Sufyani*, an evil figure who will supposedly come from Damascus or Jordan.⁷⁴ McCants explains the convoluted significance of the figure called the *Sufyani* – Shia deem him to be the evil descendent of Abu Sufyan and Mu'awiya, the caliph who fought Ali for control of Islamic territory, and one who will be ultimately killed by the *Mahdi*.⁷⁵ Sunnis have a very mixed view of the *Sufyani*: some believe he is an evil figure while others deem him to be a positive force for Sunni Islam. This illustrates the sectarian nature of “End of Times” narratives in Islam – there are many varying interpretations. The *Mahdi*, essentially the savior of Islam, subsequently emerges in this version of the story, establishes the Islamic Caliphate and conquers the majority of Europe and the Middle East. Cook relates that the *Mahdi* will supposedly arise from Khurasan, a region shared by Iran, Central Asia, and Afghanistan, or the Hijaz.⁷⁶ The AntiChrist, or *Dajjal*, will then emerge to challenge the *Mahdi*, and Jesus is supposed to reappear and fight the Antichrist, and Muslims “will not lay down this flag until we present it to Jesus, the

⁶⁹ Sahin, “Constantinople and the End Time,” 318; Brandes, Schmieder, and Voss, *Peoples of the Apocalypse*, 231.

⁷⁰ McCants, *The ISIS Apocalypse*, 145.

⁷¹ Ibid.

⁷² Cook, *Contemporary Muslim Apocalyptic Literature*, 123.

⁷³ Ibid., 127.

⁷⁴ Inter-Islam, “Imaam Mahdi and the Signs”; Cook, “Apocalyptic Theorist and Apocalyptic Practitioner,” 2.

⁷⁵ McCants, *The ISIS Apocalypse*, 108.

⁷⁶ Cook, “Apocalyptic Theorist and Apocalyptic Practitioner,” 2.

son of Maryam, and the last of us fights the Deceiver [AntiChrist].”⁷⁷

The problem with this convoluted narrative is that it is an interpretation, similar to the exegesis that permitted sex slavery. This is not the sole narrative of Islamic eschatology, and it differs depending on whether you read a Sunni or Shia apocalyptic scholar. In the case of a Salafi-Jihadist group such as ISIS, Sunni apocalypticism is clearly much more relevant. Ali Soufan references a Hadith an Al-Qaeda prisoner mentions while in custody, “If you see the black banners coming from Khurasan, join that army, even if you have to crawl over ice; no power will be able to stop them. And they will finally reach Baitul Maqdis [Jerusalem], where they will erect their flags.”⁷⁸

This Hadith, narrated by Abu Hurayrah but of questionable origin, acts as a rallying cry for many apocalyptic Salafi-Jihadists around the world. Khurasan, of course, happens to be the location of the emergence of the supposed *Mahdi*, matching the narrative Cook puts forth. The black color of the flags of ISIS is no coincidence, specifically chosen to fulfill this prophecy. Will McCants argues that ISIS’s “flag was not only the symbol of its government in Iraq and the herald of a future caliphate, it was the harbinger of the final battle at the End of Days.”⁷⁹ Furthermore, the Hadith of the Black Banners is complimented with a mythology that an army with yellow flags will fight the black flags in Syria, illustrating a sectarian clash between Shia such as Hezbollah and Sunnis such as ISIS.⁸⁰ This is what ISIS wants, “to instigate a war between Sunnis and Shi’a, in the belief that a sectarian war would be a sign that the final times have arrived,” paralleling Zarqawi’s motives with AQI.⁸¹

When ISIS conquered Mosul in 2014, they drew a parallel to the conquering of Aleppo and Mosul by Nur al-din Mahmud Zangi during the Second Crusade, a historical unification of Syria and Iraq.⁸² Prior to joining the Crusade, Nur al-Din’s subordinate Saladin gave a famous sermon from the Great Mosque of Al-Nuri, the very same mosque Baghdadi pontificated from in June 2014.⁸³ ISIS knew the mythology and knew the significance of its actions; they formulated a perfect narrative to demonstrate their legitimacy as the heirs to the Caliphate.

Cook contends that Zarqawi, more than any other Salafi-Jihadist of the times, attempted to create a jihadist and apocalyptic narrative in Iraq. The 2003 US invasion of Iraq was seen by many as an event that would precede the Hour of Judgment, and Zarqawi popularized this notion.⁸⁴ He compares the upcoming struggle in Iraq to three past Muslim battles – the Arab battle with the Persians, the Shia’s supposed alliance with Mongols and subsequent betrayal of Baghdad, and historic conflicts between the Byzantines and Arabs or Turks.⁸⁵ Cook argues that as the Iraq War worsened, Zarqawi continued to reference numerous Hadith that were remotely compatible with what had been occurring. He mentions one in particular of a foreign invader entering Mesopotamia in order to steal treasure, suggesting a clear comparison with the United States.⁸⁶ Zarqawi’s apocalyptic rhetoric paved the way for the establishment of a Caliphate and the bombastic language of ISIS.

⁷⁷ Cook, “Contemporary Muslim Apocalyptic Literature,” 127; McCants, *The ISIS Apocalypse*, 106.

⁷⁸ Soufan, Freedman, and Kitzinger, *The Black Banners*, xvii.

⁷⁹ McCants, *The ISIS Apocalypse*, 22.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, 110.

⁸¹ Stern and Berger, *ISIS: The State of Terror*, 220-221.

⁸² Weiss and Hassan, *ISIS: Inside the Army*, 16.

⁸³ *Ibid.*, 17.

⁸⁴ Filiu and DeBevoise, *Apocalypse in Islam*, 122.

⁸⁵ Cook, “Apocalyptic Theorist and Apocalyptic Practitioner,” 10-11.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, 13.

Syria has a central significance in Islamic End Times mythology, as seen by the quote, “The heart of the abode of Islam is al-Sham [Syria] and its covenant is ruling by Islam.”⁸⁷ Will McCants cites Sunni prophecies said by Muhammad claiming that al-Sham is the location for the Final Battle against the infidels:⁸⁸ “[t]he spark has been lit here in Iraq, and its heat will continue to intensify – by Allah’s permission – until it burns the crusader armies in Dabiq.”⁸⁹ This quote by Zarqawi is on the second page of every ISIS issue of *Dabiq* clearly identifying the centrality of the town in their narrative. In the first issue of the magazine, it is written that “as for the name of the magazine, then it is taken from the area named Dabiq in the northern countryside of Halab (Aleppo) in Sham... One of the greatest battles between the Muslims and the crusaders will take place near Dabiq.”⁹⁰ The primary piece of ISIS’s propaganda is named for the supposed place of one of the last battles before the Apocalypse, clearly demonstrating the centrality of eschatology to ISIS doctrine. ISIS utilizes apocalypticism in their propaganda to attract Muslims from around the world, and it works. Whether or not ISIS leadership actually believes in the Dabiq story is a subject of dispute, but they certainly take advantage of the exciting prophecies in the narrative.

McCants quotes a jihadist fighter in Aleppo as saying, “if you think all these mujahideen came from across the world to fight Assad, you’re mistaken. They are all here as promised by the Prophet. This is the war he promised – it is the Grand Battle.”⁹¹ One even admits that “Dabiq is the most important village in all of Syria for them ... especially the foreign fighters.”⁹² Clearly the claim that Dabiq is the site of a Final Battle is rooted in Islamic eschatological belief, but whether or not it is the reason why so many foreign fighters flock to Syria is disputed. The narrative does not perfectly match with the mythology of Dabiq, as McCants mentions, due to the alliance of Muslims and non-Muslims against ISIS, but “in the apocalyptic imagination, inconvenient facts rarely impede the glorious march to the end of the world.”⁹³ But the fact that current geopolitical events ultimately do not match the story is irrelevant – Islam is a religion of interpretation, and that of course includes its eschatology.

Despite a historical significance on the return of the *Mahdi* in Islamic eschatology, McCants maintains that ISIS does not typically mention him.⁹⁴ He theorizes that Baghdadi was hesitant to utilize the *Mahdi* mythology due to the initial failures of ISI and Zarqawi’s and Masri’s constant reiterations of the imminence of his arrival. McCants accurately describes ISIS’s policy when it comes to apocalypticism, “the shift of eschatological emphasis from the person of the *Mahdi* to the institution of the caliphate buys the group time to govern while sustaining the apocalyptic moment that has so captivated its supporters.”⁹⁵ This is an excellent summation of the current strategy ISIS is likely employing in regards to religion.

⁸⁷ Khilafah.com, “The heart Islam is al-Sham.”

⁸⁸ McCants, *The ISIS Apocalypse*, 100.

⁸⁹ Islamic State (ISIS, ISIL) Magazine: Dabiq - Issue 1, *The Return of Khalifa*, Cover.

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, 4.

⁹¹ McCants, *The ISIS Apocalypse*, 101.

⁹² *Ibid.*, 104.

⁹³ *Ibid.*, 105.

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, 142.

⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, 143.

Conclusion

ISIS's ultimate goal is to expand the Caliphate to cover the entire world, and it has succeeded in receiving *bayat* from many Salafi-Jihadist groups around the globe. Its dramatic expansion, both in territory and fighters, has surprised governments of Western and Muslim countries alike. ISIS propaganda like *Dabiq* gives extraordinary insight into the minds of ISIS leadership, something Western governments did not have easily accessible when combating Al-Qaeda in the 1990s. It is clear that the actions of ISIS are indisputably rooted in religion, at least in one interpretation of Islam, and Islamic eschatological discourse has a strong impact on the organization as a whole. But whether or not ISIS leadership truly believes in its apocalyptic rhetoric or is simply espousing it to appeal to certain individuals is still an important question that requires additional research. Although religion had a significant role in establishing the legitimacy of the Caliphate, as ISIS continues to gain recognition as a real state, religion will likely become less and less relevant. Regardless of its apocalyptic sincerity, the fight against ISIS is ultimately one of ideas and words, not only just of weapons.

In the fall of 2016, ISIS lost the theologically significant town of Dabiq, seriously damaging their apocalyptic credibility, which led to the creation of a new magazine called *Rumiyah*, to divert attention away from apocalyptic fervor. Further recent events include the assault on Mosul by the Iraqi military, who are slowly pushing ISIS out of its capital in Iraq as of December of 2016. American partners in Syria are slowly launching the Raqqa Offensive to retake ISIS's Syrian capital of Raqqa. With the Syrian Government's recent victory in Aleppo, backed by Russia and Iran, the Syrian Opposition has been severely weakened, which will likely provide a greater space for ISIS to grow. Terrorist groups rise and fall, resurrect and propagate, in varying forms. Ultimately, ISIS can and will be defeated, but the even more important question will remain – what will happen next?

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