

ISSUES IN PERSPECTIVE

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Understanding ISIS: Its Origins, Its Ideology and Its Context

The emergence of the Islamic State (aka ISIS or ISIL) is an important development within militant Islam. Since 9/11 America's terrorist focus has been on al Qaeda, but no longer. We are learning more about ISIS and it is now possible to place this radical Islamic faction in context with a clear ideology and doctrine.

- First of all, a comment about ISIS and al Qaeda. The head of ISIS, the Islamic State, is Abu Bakr al Baghdadi and he is claiming the title of "emir of the believers"—the spiritual leader of the Muslim world. In 1996 the Afghan Taliban leader, Mullah Muhammad Omar, claimed the emir title when he wrapped himself in Prophet Muhammad's cloak in a Kandahar mosque. It was to Mullah Omar that Osama bin Laden and other al Qaeda leaders pledged their allegiance. Most al Qaeda leaders still maintain that vow to Mullah Omar. Indeed, Ayman al Zawahiri, al Qaeda's new leader, affirmed that vow in a video released this month. Furthermore, on 29 June 2014, Baghdadi not only claimed the title "emir of believers"; he also claimed the title of caliph of the entire Muslim world and wanted to henceforth be known as "Caliph Ibrahim." As Yaroslav Trofimov recently argued in the *Wall Street Journal*, "That was a bold claim that shocked even old guard Islamist extremists, let alone ordinary Muslims who have been horrified by the Islamic State's atrocities. The title of caliph, after all, has lain dormant since the heir to the Ottoman throne Abdulmecid II relinquished it in 1924." Although very few Muslims are acknowledging Baghdadi as the caliph, the goal of ISIS is clear—worldwide domination of Islam. In light of the extraordinary military success of ISIS in Syria and Iraq and the sophisticated ISIS propaganda machine, the claim of a restored caliphate is unsettling. With its full use of the social media, ISIS stands in stark contrast to Mullah Omar and the Taliban, for Omar communicates with his followers only twice a year. Understandably, the Taliban and their supporters in Afghanistan and Pakistan have forthrightly rejected Baghdadi's claims, but the appeal in ISIS, especially among young male Muslims, is being noticed by the United States and the European Union. ISIS is now a force to be dealt with.
- Second, what is the origin of the ISIS ideology? The roots of Baghdadi's ideology are in the 18th century Arabian Peninsula. As *New York Times* reporter David Kirkpatrick demonstrates, "It was there that the Saud clan formed an alliance with the puritanical scholar Muhammad ibn Abd al-Wahhab. And as they conquered the warring tribes of the [Arabian] desert, his austere interpretation of Islam became the foundation of the Saudi state." Indeed, Bernard Haykel of Princeton University suggests that "[ISIS] is a

kind of untamed Wahhabism. Wahhabism is the closest religious cognate.” The leaders of ISIS have made clear that they have a solid commitment to the Wahhabi movement of Sunni Islam: “The group circulates images of Wahhabi religious textbooks from Saudi Arabia in the schools it controls. Videos from the group’s territory have shown Wahhabi texts plastered on the sides of an official missionary van.” Furthermore, the Wahhabi tradition has embraced the killing of those deemed unbelievers as essential to purifying the community of the faithful, which is what ISIS does. Haykel argues that “violence is a part of their ideology. For al Qaeda, violence is a means to an end; for ISIS, it is an end in itself.” Baghdadi is, however, willing to adopt other ideas into his ideology. For example, he borrowed two ideas from the broader Islamic movements of the Muslim Brotherhood and al Qaeda: (1) Where Wahhabism preaches obedience to earthly rulers, Baghdadi adopted the call for political action against foreign domination of the Arab world. This idea has of course energized both the Brotherhood and al Qaeda. (2) He adopted the idea of a restored caliphate as a part of the broader anti-Western dimension of resurgent political Islam. So, ISIS is clearly declaring that in Baghdadi is the restored caliphate; “join us now or you are the enemy too,” ISIS trumpets. But other Islamic leaders reject Baghdadi’s use of this caliphate idea because Baghdadi lacks broad support across Islam. Al Qaeda’s ideologues, for example, insist that the promised caliphate requires a broad consensus, on behalf of Muslim scholars if not all Muslims, and not merely one man’s proclamation after a military victory. Indeed, recently 126 distinguished scholars and clerics penned a lengthy, 24-point refutation of Baghdadi’s claim. On the grounds of Islamic jurisprudence, they argued, a caliph can only be chosen by general consensus; anything else would be a *fitna*, Arabic for strife or sedition. Muslims lament deeply the collapse of the Islamic caliphate and long for its restoration. It is a deep wound from their past. It is the “obligation of the *ummah*, the Muslim ‘nation’” to restore the caliphate, these scholars maintain. But they all agree Baghdadi is not that caliph.

One final thought about ISIS: If the West, primarily led by the United States, is serious about fighting ISIS and ultimately defeating it, it must confront a significant reality of the Islamic world. There are currently three civil wars raging in the Arab, Muslim world today: (1) The civil war within Sunni Islam between radical jihadists and moderate mainstream Sunni Muslims and regimes; (2) the civil war across the region between Sunnis funded by Saudi Arabia and Shiites funded by Iran; and (3) the civil war between Sunni jihadists and all other minorities in the region—Yazidis, Turkmen, Kurds, Christians, Jews and Alawites. As columnist Tom Friedman so eloquently puts it: “When you have a region beset by that many civil wars at once, it means there is no center, only sides. And when you intervene in the middle of a region with no center, you very quickly become a side.” These various civil wars have become the breeding ground for the ISIS cancer. It will take great wisdom and care for our leaders as we become more deeply involved in this region. In fact, columnist Gerald F. Seib suggests that having the West, especially the US, join the fight is precisely what ISIS wants: “Islamic State literature suggests the group thinks a confrontation with the West is inevitable. Muslims ‘have a statement to make that will cause the world to hear and understand the meaning of terrorism, and boots that will trample the idol of nationalism, and uncover its deviant nature,’ declares Baghdadi.”

Moreover, Seib contends, the group's literature belittles other Islamic extremist groups for shrinking from or seeking to move slowly toward a fight with the West. It seems therefore wise to conclude that ISIS is not merely stumbling into this fight. Perhaps this is part of its grand design.

Those of us who know the true God through His revelation in Jesus Christ must sincerely be praying for the leaders of the US, of Europe and other nations joining in this growing fight with ISIS. The region of the Middle East is in total upheaval and ISIS is merely one dimension of this mess. Defeating and destroying them will not occur quickly. It will take a significant commitment, significant treasure and significant fortitude to defeat ISIS. May God give our leaders to grace to know exactly how to do this.

See Yaroslav Trofimov in the *Wall Street Journal* (27-28 September 2014); David Kirkpatrick in the *New York Times* (25 September 2014); *The Economist* (4 October 2014), pp. 53-55; Thomas Friedman in the *New York Times* (3 September 2014); and Gerald F. Seib in the *Wall Street Journal* (16 September 2014).