

ISSUES IN PERSPECTIVE

Dr. James P. Eckman, President Emeritus
Grace University, Omaha, Nebraska
November 21, 2015

ISIS, Terror and Theology: Understanding Paris

Since 2014, President Obama has consistently underestimated ISIS. For example, in January of 2014, he characterized ISIS as the “JV” team and that it “was not a direct threat to us or something that we have to wade into.” Shortly before the horrific ISIS attack in Paris last week, he declared that “I don’t think [ISIS] is gaining strength” for “we have contained them.” However, ISIS recently blew up a Russian airliner over the Sinai, engineered a bombing in Lebanon, and has expanded into more than half-dozen countries—and then carried out the strategic and coordinated attack in Paris; the worst attack on Paris since World War II.

To understand ISIS and why it is such a threat to Europe and to America, I want to summarize a piece I had written earlier in 2015. It remains germane to grasping the reality of the lethal threat ISIS poses. We cannot ignore the genuineness of this threat. Seemingly, out of nowhere, last June, the Islamic State in Iraq and al-Sham (ISIS or sometimes called ISIL) seized Mosul, Iraq, and has gained more territory in Iraq and Syria since then, comprising an area now larger than the United Kingdom. Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi has been the leader of ISIS since May 2010. He regards himself as the caliph of Islam and his movement is energized by a deeply-rooted Islamic theology. ISIS is not a group of thugs who simply use Islam to justify their actions. ISIS is an intensely important expression of Islam and it can be only understood if examined from that perspective. In a profoundly important article in an earlier 2015 issue of *The Atlantic*, Graeme Wood writes that ISIS “follows a distinctive variety of Islam whose beliefs about the path to the Day of Judgment matter to its strategy, and can help the West know its enemy and predict its behavior.” Our current leadership in America refuses to connect Islam with ISIS (or any jihadist terrorist group for that matter). I believe Wood’s article should be required reading for President Obama and for all Americans. I want to summarize the salient points from Wood’s analysis of ISIS:

1. Wood believes that the West has misunderstood ISIS for two reasons: (1) The West tends to see jihadism as monolithic, and applies the logic of al Qaeda to an organization that has clearly eclipsed it. For many Islamic jihadists, al Qaeda is disdained in terms of its priorities and its leadership. Islamic radical jihadism is no longer centered in al Qaeda; it has shifted to ISIS. (2) Many in the West, including the United States, refuse to acknowledge the Islamic State’s medieval religious nature. ISIS leaders consistently refer to “moderns,” i.e., jihadists led by modern secular people, with modern political concerns. ISIS leaders insist that they will not—cannot—waver from governing precepts that were embedded in Islam by the Prophet Muhammad and his earliest followers. They quote from and rely upon the specific traditions and texts of early Islam. For example, Sheik Abu Muhammad al-Adnani, the Islamic State’s chief

spokesman, called on Muslims in various western nations to find the infidel and “smash his head with a rock,” poison him, run him over with a car, or “destroy his crops.” This is language directly from The Prophet’s orders of how Muslims in the lands of *kuffar*, or infidels, are to deal with infidels in an unmerciful manner. The brutal reality is “that the Islamic State is Islamic. Very Islamic . . . But pretending that it isn’t actually a religious, millenarian group, with a theology that must be understood to be combatted, has already led the United States to underestimate it and back foolish schemes to counter it.”

2. Both al Qaeda and the Islamic State are tied to the jihadist wing of Islamic Sunnis called Salafism, after the Arabic for *al salaf al salih*, the “pious forefathers.” These forefathers include the Prophet Muhammad and his earliest adherents, whom Salafis honor as models for behavior, including warfare, couture, family life, and almost all other facets of life. Salafism also makes the distinction between an apostate and a sinner—a distinction far more important to the Islamic State. For ISIS, Shiites—most Iraqi Arabs and Muslims in Iran are Shiites—meet their standard for apostates, for Shi’ism is an innovation, and “to innovate the Koran is to deny its initial perfection.” Therefore, following the ancient doctrine of *takfiri*, ISIS is committed to purifying the world by killing vast numbers of people, including Shiite Muslims. There is little objective reporting on ISIS coming out of the West right now, but social media posts from the region make it clear that the true extent of the slaughter is unknowable. It is clear that individual executions occur daily and mass executions every few weeks. Wood writes: “But focusing on them to the exclusion of ideology reflects another kind of Western bias: that if religious ideology doesn’t matter much in Washington or Berlin, surely it must be equally irrelevant in Raqqa or Mosul. When a masked executioner says *Allahu Akbar* while beheading an apostate, sometimes he’s doing so for religious reasons.” Furthermore, Bernard Haykel, the leading expert on the ISIS theology, explained to Wood that Muslims who call ISIS un-Islamic are “embarrassed and politically correct, with a cotton-candy view of their own religions,” [one] that neglects “what their religion has historically and legally required.” Many denials of the Islamic State’s religious nature, Haykel argued, are rooted in an “interfaith-Christian-nonsense tradition.” Islamic State fighters “are smack in the middle of the medieval tradition and are bringing it wholesale into the present day.”
3. Restoring the Islamic caliphate is not only a political entity but also a vehicle for salvation. One Islamic scholar with whom Wood spoke stated that “the Muslim who acknowledges one omnipotent god and prays, but who dies without pledging himself to a valid caliph and incurring the obligations of that oath, has failed to live a fully Islamic life.” He argued that “I would go so far as to say that Islam has been reestablished” by the caliphate. And the caliph is required to implement Sharia law, which is what al-Baghdadi is doing.
4. Eschatology is an important element of the ISIS movement. Indeed, Wood writes that “The Islamic State differs from nearly every other current jihadist movement in believing

that it is written into God's script as a central character." Their brand of Sunni Islam focuses on the teachings that there will be only 12 legitimate caliphs, and that Baghdadi is the eighth; that the armies of "Rome" will mass to meet the armies of Islam in northern Syria; and that Islam's final showdown with an anti-Messiah will occur in Jerusalem after a period of renewed Islamic conquest. For that reason, ISIS attaches great importance to their conquest of the Syrian city of Dabiq (near Aleppo). Wood summarizes that "It is here, the Prophet reportedly said, that the armies of Rome will set up their camp. The armies of Islam will meet them, and Dabiq will be Rome's Waterloo or its Antietam . . . Now that it has taken Dabiq, the Islamic State awaits the arrival of an enemy army there, whose defeat will initiate the countdown to the apocalypse." There is much debate within this teaching of Islam as to the identity of "Rome." Some suggest Turkey (the seat of the previous Ottoman caliphate) or some infidel army led by the United States, for example. The teaching about the End of Days includes the great victory of the caliphate at Dabiq, which will cause the caliphate to expand, after which an anti-Messiah (called Dajjal) will come from the Khorasan region of eastern Iran and kill a vast number of the caliphate's fighters, until just 5,000 remain, cornered in Jerusalem. "Just as Dajjal prepares to finish them off, Jesus—the second-most-revered prophet in Islam—will return to Earth, spear Dajjal, and lead the Muslims to victory."

5. Thus, the waging of war is the essential duty of the caliph and the obligation of this type of warfare is to terrorize the enemy through beheadings, crucifixions, enslavement of women and children—all to hasten ultimate victory. Central to understanding the caliphate is that it does not recognize international borders or nation states—a product of the 1648 Peace of Westphalia. To recognize that proposition is ideological suicide for ISIS.

As one studies the theology of the Islamic State, especially its eschatology, one sees the foolishness of speaking of ISIS as only a group of terrorists. This is the shortcoming of our president. As president his obligation is to define reality for the American people and do so with honesty and fortitude. He has done neither. Further, as one studies the ISIS eschatology, one sees some similarity to biblical eschatology. The End of Days is all wrapped around the return of Jesus, who will defeat evil and establish His rule. He will not establish Islam as the world religion; He will establish Himself, as His Father promised, to rule and reign over planet earth—His "inheritance", Psalm 2—which will then lead to the New Heaven and New Earth (Isaiah 65, Revelation 21-22). Behind every false religion is Satanic power (see 1 Corinthians 10: 19-20) and, as we learn from the temptation of Jesus, Satan is powerful, the "God of this age," and the "prince of the power of the air." His methodology is deception and guile to lead humans into error and away from the truth. Modern day Islam in all its forms (but none more poignantly than the theology of ISIS) demonstrates this truth. In Ephesian 6:12, the Apostle Paul declares that "we fight not against flesh and blood, but against evil rulers and authorities of the unseen world, against mighty powers in this dark world, and against evil spirits in the heavenly places" (NIV). This explains ISIS.

President Obama will not likely change his stance on ISIS, but you and I should make this a priority in our praying. ISIS will not win! ISIS will not secure a caliphate according to their dream and vision. But they will no doubt kill many more image-bearers of the one, true God. Let us pray that the one, true God will stay this evil and end the terror and bloodshed that ISIS fosters.

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.

See Marc Thiessen in the *Washington Post* (16 November 2015); 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). Also, see the incredibly profound and helpful article by Graeme Wood, “What ISIS Really Wants,” in *The Atlantic* (March 2015).