

ISSUES IN PERSPECTIVE

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The ISIS Apocalypse Delayed

During the weekend of 8-9 October 2016, ISIS fighters lost control of the village of Dabiq, not far from the city of Aleppo. The village of Dabiq has been central to the identity of ISIS. The group's online magazine is called *Dabiq*, and its news agency, Amaq, is named after the surrounding area of Dabiq. Dabiq had been lauded by ISIS as the center of the final apocalyptic battle between the self-styled caliphate of Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi and the Western crusaders. ISIS deduced the importance of Dabiq for its eschatology from an obscure *Hadith*, or saying of the Prophet Muhammad concerning the end times (see #3 below).

ISIS is now backtracking on the importance of Dabiq in 2016. Islamic State media outlets pointed out over the last few days that the other conditions for the prophesied battle had not materialized, like the appearance of a "crusader army" or the Mahdi, a messiah-like figure (see below) or the 80-nation coalition of fighters. Since ISIS has lost critical territory in Iraq and will no doubt lose control of Mosul in the next few weeks, its only remaining stronghold is in Syria, specifically the city of Raqqa along the Euphrates River. What will happen to ISIS and its radical brand of Islam with its fanatical vision of the apocalypse? Will ISIS go underground and become just one of the other small, radical Islamic sects? If it loses its territory, Baghdadi will no longer be able to claim his rule of the restored Islamic caliphate, which he has done since 2010.

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 an intensely important expression of Islam and it can be only understood if examined from that perspective. In a profoundly important 2015 article in the *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." This article is quite important in helping us to understand the complexities of Islam and in concluding that, even if it loses control of significant pieces of territory (its caliphate), ISIS will not simply disappear.

Important summary points from Graeme Wood's article:

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. 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.
3. 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.”

4. 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. As one studies 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.

See Graeme Wood, “What ISIS Really Wants,” in *The Atlantic* (March 2015); “Islamic State’s Messianic Apocalypse is Postponed” in *The Economist* (24 October 2016); and Anne Barnard, “Losing Territory, ISIS Keeps Sights on Longer Fight” in the *New York Times* (19 October 2016).