**How Obama Thinks About Terrorism**

The president and his Republican opponents view threats like ISIS in fundamentally different ways.

Peter Beinart December 7, 2015

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At the core of Barack Obama’s [terrorism speech](https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/the-fix/wp/2015/12/06/heres-what-obama-said-in-his-sunday-night-address-an-annotated-transcript/) on Sunday night lay a contradiction. He gave the address to convince an increasingly fearful nation that he takes the terrorist threat seriously. But he doesn’t, at least not in the way his political opponents do.

For George W. Bush, the fight against jihadist terrorism was World War III. In his [speech to Congress](http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-srv/nation/specials/attacked/transcripts/bushaddress_092001.html) nine days after 9/11, Bush called al-Qaeda “the heirs of all the murderous ideologies of the 20th century ... they follow in the path of fascism, Nazism, and totalitarianism.” Many Republicans still see the “war on terror” in these epic terms. After the Paris attacks, Marco Rubio didn’t merely warn that the Islamic State might take over Iraq, Syria, and other parts of the Middle East. He warned that it might take over the United States. America, he [argued](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=q8qa2ZRaOmc), is at war with people who “literally want to overthrow our society and replace it with their radical Sunni Islamic view of the future.” In his telling, the United States and “radical Islam” are virtual equals, pitted in a “civilizational conflict” that “either they win or we win.”

Obama thinks that’s absurd. Unlike Rubio, he considers violent jihadism a small, toxic strain within Islamic civilization, not a civilization itself. And unlike Bush, he doesn’t consider it a serious ideological competitor. In the 1930s, when fascism and communism were at their ideological height, many believed they could produce higher living standards for ordinary people than democratic capitalist societies that were prone to devastating cycles of boom and bust. No one believes that about “radical Islam” today. In Obama’s view, I suspect, democratic capitalism’s real ideological adversary is not the “radical Islam” of ISIS. It’s the authoritarian, state-managed capitalism of China.

While Republicans think ISIS is strong and growing stronger, Obama thinks it’s weak and growing weaker. “Terrorists,” he declared on Sunday, now “turn to less complicated acts of violence like the mass shootings that are all too common in our society.” In other words, the Islamic State probably can’t do anything to America that we Americans aren’t doing to ourselves all the time, and now largely take for granted.

Obama also argued that the Islamic State is losing in the Middle East, where the “strategy that we are using now—air strikes, special forces, and working with local forces who are fighting to regain control of their own country” will produce a “sustainable victory.”

The leading GOP presidential candidates reject that. They believe defeating the Islamic State requires some dramatic, if vaguely defined, new military and ideological exertion. Obama, by contrast, thinks America simply needs to not screw up. That means not being “drawn once more” into an effort to “occupy foreign lands,” thus allowing the Islamic State to use “our presence to draw new recruits.”

While Obama doesn’t say it outright, he appears to be subtly referencing Robert Pape’s [influential argument](http://www.amazon.com/Dying-Win-Strategic-Suicide-Terrorism/dp/0812973380) that the great driver of suicide terrorism is not jihadist ideology but occupation. Because Obama, unlike Bush and Rubio, believes the Islamic State is ideologically weak, he thinks America’s current strategy will eventually defeat it unless America commits a large occupying force, which would give the jihadists a massive shot in the arm.

The other unforced error America must avoid, according to Obama, is “letting this fight be defined as a war between America and Islam. That, too, is what groups like ISIL want.” Because the GOP candidates see violent jihadism as a powerful, seductive ideology, they think that many American Muslims are at risk of becoming terrorists, and thus that the United States must monitor them more aggressively. Because Obama sees violent jihadism as ideologically weak and unattractive, he thinks that few American Muslims will embrace it unless the United States makes them feel like enemies in their own country—which is exactly what Donald Trump risks doing.

Obama is a kind of Fukuyamian. Like Francis Fukuyama, the author of the famed 1989 essay “The End of History,” he believes that powerful, structural forces will lead liberal democracies to triumph over their foes—so long as these democracies don’t do stupid things like persecuting Muslims at home or invading Muslim lands abroad. His Republican opponents, by contrast, believe that powerful and sinister enemies are overwhelming America, either overseas (the Rubio version) or domestically (the Trump version).

For them, the only thing more terrifying than “radical Islam” is the equanimity with which President Obama meets it. And, to their dismay, that equanimity was very much on display on Sunday night.

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What is the Islamic State?

Graeme Wood March 2015

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Where did it come from, and what are its intentions? The simplicity of these questions can be deceiving, and few Western leaders seem to know the answers. In December, *The New York Times* published confidential comments by Major General Michael K. Nagata, the Special Operations commander for the United States in the Middle East, admitting that he had hardly begun figuring out the Islamic State’s appeal. “We have not defeated the idea,” he said. “We do not even understand the idea.” In the past year, President Obama has referred to the Islamic State, variously, as “not Islamic” and as al-Qaeda’s “jayvee team,” statements that reflected confusion about the group, and may have contributed to significant strategic errors.

The group seized Mosul, Iraq, last June, and already rules an area larger than the United Kingdom. Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi has been its leader since May 2010, but until last summer, his most recent known appearance on film was a grainy mug shot from a stay in U.S. captivity at Camp Bucca during the occupation of Iraq. Then, on July 5 of last year, he stepped into the pulpit of the Great Mosque of al-Nuri in Mosul, to deliver a Ramadan sermon as the first caliph in generations—upgrading his resolution from grainy to high-definition, and his position from hunted guerrilla to commander of all Muslims. The inflow of jihadists that followed, from around the world, was unprecedented in its pace and volume, and is continuing.

Our ignorance of the Islamic State is in some ways understandable: It is a hermit kingdom; few have gone there and returned. Baghdadi has spoken on camera only once. But his address, and the Islamic State’s countless other propaganda videos and encyclicals, are online, and the caliphate’s supporters have toiled mightily to make their project knowable. We can gather that their state rejects peace as a matter of principle; that it hungers for genocide; that its religious views make it constitutionally incapable of certain types of change, even if that change might ensure its survival; and that it considers itself a harbinger of—and headline player in—the imminent end of the world.

The Islamic State, also known as the Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham (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. Its rise to power is less like the triumph of the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt (a group whose leaders the Islamic State considers apostates) than like the realization of a dystopian alternate reality in which David Koresh or Jim Jones survived to wield absolute power over not just a few hundred people, but some 8 million.

We have misunderstood the nature of the Islamic State in at least two ways. First, we tend to see jihadism as monolithic, and to apply the logic of al‑Qaeda to an organization that has decisively eclipsed it. The Islamic State supporters I spoke with still refer to Osama bin Laden as “Sheikh Osama,” a title of honor. But jihadism has evolved since al-Qaeda’s heyday, from about 1998 to 2003, and many jihadists disdain the group’s priorities and current leadership.

Bin Laden viewed his terrorism as a prologue to a caliphate he did not expect to see in his lifetime. His organization was flexible, operating as a geographically diffuse network of autonomous cells. The Islamic State, by contrast, requires territory to remain legitimate, and a top-down structure to rule it. (Its bureaucracy is divided into civil and military arms, and its territory into provinces.)

We are misled in a second way, by a well-intentioned but dishonest campaign to deny the Islamic State’s medieval religious nature. Peter Bergen, who produced the first interview with bin Laden in 1997, titled his first book *Holy War, Inc.* in part to acknowledge bin Laden as a creature of the modern secular world. Bin Laden corporatized terror and franchised it out. He requested specific political concessions, such as the withdrawal of U.S. forces from Saudi Arabia. His foot soldiers navigated the modern world confidently. On Mohamed Atta’s last full day of life, he shopped at Walmart and ate dinner at Pizza Hut.

There is a temptation to rehearse this observation—that jihadists are modern secular people, with modern political concerns, wearing medieval religious disguise—and make it fit the Islamic State. In fact, much of what the group does looks nonsensical except in light of a sincere, carefully considered commitment to returning civilization to a seventh-century legal environment, and ultimately to bringing about the apocalypse.

The most-articulate spokesmen for that position are the Islamic State’s officials and supporters themselves. They refer derisively to “moderns.” In conversation, they insist that they will not—cannot—waver from governing precepts that were embedded in Islam by the Prophet Muhammad and his earliest followers. They often speak in codes and allusions that sound odd or old-fashioned to non-Muslims, but refer to specific traditions and texts of early Islam.

To take one example: In September, Sheikh Abu Muhammad al-Adnani, the Islamic State’s chief spokesman, called on Muslims in Western countries such as France and Canada to find an infidel and “smash his head with a rock,” poison him, run him over with a car, or “destroy his crops.” To Western ears, the biblical-sounding punishments—the stoning and crop destruction—juxtaposed strangely with his more modern-sounding call to vehicular homicide. (As if to show that he could terrorize by imagery alone, Adnani also referred to Secretary of State John Kerry as an “uncircumcised geezer.”)

But Adnani was not merely talking trash. His speech was laced with theological and legal discussion, and his exhortation to attack crops directly echoed orders from Muhammad to leave well water and crops alone—unless the armies of Islam were in a defensive position, in which case Muslims in the lands of *kuffar*, or infidels, should be unmerciful, and poison away.

The reality is that the Islamic State is Islamic. *Very* Islamic. Yes, it has attracted psychopaths and adventure seekers, drawn largely from the disaffected populations of the Middle East and Europe. But the religion preached by its most ardent followers derives from coherent and even learned interpretations of Islam.

Virtually every major decision and law promulgated by the Islamic State adheres to what it calls, in its press and pronouncements, and on its billboards, license plates, stationery, and coins, “the Prophetic methodology,” which means following the prophecy and example of Muhammad, in punctilious detail. Muslims can reject the Islamic State; nearly all do. But pretending that it isn’t actually a religious, millenarian group, with theology that must be understood to be combatted, has already led the United States to underestimate it and back foolish schemes to counter it. We’ll need to get acquainted with the Islamic State’s intellectual genealogy if we are to react in a way that will not strengthen it, but instead help it self-immolate in its own excessive zeal.

**Devotion**

In November, the Islamic State released an infomercial-like video tracing its origins to bin Laden. It acknowledged Abu Musa’b al Zarqawi, the brutal head of al‑Qaeda in Iraq from roughly 2003 until his killing in 2006, as a more immediate progenitor, followed sequentially by two other guerrilla leaders before Baghdadi, the caliph. Notably unmentioned: bin Laden’s successor, Ayman al Zawahiri, the owlish Egyptian eye surgeon who currently heads al‑Qaeda. Zawahiri has not pledged allegiance to Baghdadi, and he is increasingly hated by his fellow jihadists. His isolation is not helped by his lack of charisma; in videos he comes across as squinty and annoyed. But the split between al-Qaeda and the Islamic State has been long in the making, and begins to explain, at least in part, the outsize bloodlust of the latter.

Zawahiri’s companion in isolation is a Jordanian cleric named Abu Muhammad al Maqdisi, 55, who has a fair claim to being al-Qaeda’s intellectual architect and the most important jihadist unknown to the average American newspaper reader. On most matters of doctrine, Maqdisi and the Islamic State agree. Both are closely identified with the jihadist wing of a branch of Sunnism called Salafism, after the Arabic *al salaf al salih*, the “pious forefathers.” These forefathers are the Prophet himself and his earliest adherents, whom Salafis honor and emulate as the models for all behavior, including warfare, couture, family life, even dentistry.

Maqdisi taught Zarqawi, who went to war in Iraq with the older man’s advice in mind. In time, though, Zarqawi surpassed his mentor in fanaticism, and eventually earned his rebuke. At issue was Zarqawi’s penchant for bloody spectacle—and, as a matter of doctrine, his hatred of other Muslims, to the point of excommunicating and killing them. In Islam, the practice of *takfir*, or excommunication, is theologically perilous. “If a man says to his brother, ‘You are an infidel,’ ” the Prophet said, “then one of them is right.” If the accuser is wrong, he himself has committed apostasy by making a false accusation. The punishment for apostasy is death. And yet Zarqawi heedlessly expanded the range of behavior that could make Muslims infidels.

Maqdisi wrote to his former pupil that he needed to exercise caution and “not issue sweeping proclamations of *takfir*” or “proclaim people to be apostates because of their sins.” The distinction between apostate and sinner may appear subtle, but it is a key point of contention between al-Qaeda and the Islamic State. Denying the holiness of the Koran or the prophecies of Muhammad is straightforward apostasy. But Zarqawi and the state he spawned take the position that many other acts can remove a Muslim from Islam. These include, in certain cases, selling alcohol or drugs, wearing Western clothes or shaving one’s beard, voting in an election—even for a Muslim candidate—and being lax about calling other people apostates. Being a Shiite, as most Iraqi Arabs are, meets the standard as well, because the Islamic State regards Shiism as innovation, and to innovate on the Koran is to deny its initial perfection. (The Islamic State claims that common Shiite practices, such as worship at the graves of imams and public self-flagellation, have no basis in the Koran or in the example of the Prophet.) That means roughly 200 million Shia are marked for death. So too are the heads of state of every Muslim country, who have elevated man-made law above Sharia by running for office or enforcing laws not made by God.

Following *takfiri* doctrine, the Islamic State is committed to purifying the world by killing vast numbers of people. The lack of objective reporting from its territory makes the true extent of the slaughter unknowable, but social-media posts from the region suggest that individual executions happen more or less continually, and mass executions every few weeks. Muslim “apostates” are the most common victims. Exempted from automatic execution, it appears, are Christians who do not resist their new government. Baghdadi permits them to live, as long as they pay a special tax, known as the *jizya*, and acknowledge their subjugation. The Koranic authority for this practice is not in dispute.

Centuries have passed since the wars of religion ceased in Europe, and since men stopped dying in large numbers because of arcane theological disputes. Hence, perhaps, the incredulity and denial with which Westerners have greeted news of the theology and practices of the Islamic State. Many refuse to believe that this group is as devout as it claims to be, or as backward-looking or apocalyptic as its actions and statements suggest. Their skepticism is comprehensible. In the past, Westerners who accused Muslims of blindly following ancient scriptures came to deserved grief from academics—notably the late Edward Said—who pointed out that calling Muslims “ancient” was usually just another way to denigrate them. Look instead, these scholars urged, to the conditions in which these ideologies arose—the bad governance, the shifting social mores, the humiliation of living in lands valued only for their oil.

Without acknowledgment of these factors, no explanation of the rise of the Islamic State could be complete. 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.

Many mainstream Muslim organizations have gone so far as to say the Islamic State is, in fact, *un-Islamic*. It is, of course, reassuring to know that the vast majority of Muslims have zero interest in replacing Hollywood movies with public executions as evening entertainment. But Muslims who call the Islamic State un-Islamic are typically, as the Princeton scholar Bernard Haykel, the leading expert on the group’s theology, told me, “embarrassed and politically correct, with a cotton-candy view of their own religion” that neglects “what their religion has historically and legally required.” Many denials of the Islamic State’s religious nature, he said, are rooted in an “interfaith-Christian-nonsense tradition.”

According to Haykel, the ranks of the Islamic State are deeply infused with religious vigor. Koranic quotations are ubiquitous. “Even the foot soldiers spout this stuff constantly,” Haykel said. “They mug for their cameras and repeat their basic doctrines in formulaic fashion, and they do it *all the time*.” He regards the claim that the Islamic State has distorted the texts of Islam as preposterous, sustainable only through willful ignorance. “People want to absolve Islam,” he said. “It’s this ‘Islam is a religion of peace’ mantra. As if there is such a thing as ‘Islam’! It’s what Muslims do, and how they interpret their texts.” Those texts are shared by all Sunni Muslims, not just the Islamic State. “And these guys have just as much legitimacy as anyone else.”

All Muslims acknowledge that Muhammad’s earliest conquests were not tidy affairs, and that the laws of war passed down in the Koran and in the narrations of the Prophet’s rule were calibrated to fit a turbulent and violent time. In Haykel’s estimation, the fighters of the Islamic State are authentic throwbacks to early Islam and are faithfully reproducing its norms of war. This behavior includes a number of practices that modern Muslims tend to prefer not to acknowledge as integral to their sacred texts. “Slavery, crucifixion, and beheadings are not something that freakish [jihadists] are cherry-picking from the medieval tradition,” Haykel said. Islamic State fighters “are smack in the middle of the medieval tradition and are bringing it wholesale into the present day.”

The Koran specifies crucifixion as one of the only punishments permitted for enemies of Islam. The tax on Christians finds clear endorsement in the Surah Al-Tawba, the Koran’s ninth chapter, which instructs Muslims to fight Christians and Jews “until they pay the *jizya* with willing submission, and feel themselves subdued.” The Prophet, whom all Muslims consider exemplary, imposed these rules and owned slaves.

Leaders of the Islamic State have taken emulation of Muhammad as strict duty, and have revived traditions that have been dormant for hundreds of years. “What’s striking about them is not just the literalism, but also the seriousness with which they read these texts,” Haykel said. “There is an assiduous, obsessive seriousness that Muslims don’t normally have.”

Before the rise of the Islamic State, no group in the past few centuries had attempted more-radical fidelity to the Prophetic model than the Wahhabis of 18th‑century Arabia. They conquered most of what is now Saudi Arabia, and their strict practices survive in a diluted version of Sharia there. Haykel sees an important distinction between the groups, though: “The Wahhabis were not wanton in their violence.” They were surrounded by Muslims, and they conquered lands that were already Islamic; this stayed their hand. “ISIS, by contrast, is really reliving the early period.” Early Muslims were surrounded by non-Muslims, and the Islamic State, because of its *takfiri* tendencies, considers itself to be in the same situation.

If al-Qaeda wanted to revive slavery, it never said so. And why would it? Silence on slavery probably reflected strategic thinking, with public sympathies in mind: when the Islamic State began enslaving people, even some of its supporters balked. Nonetheless, the caliphate has continued to embrace slavery and crucifixion without apology. “We will conquer your Rome, break your crosses, and enslave your women,” Adnani, the spokesman, promised in one of his periodic valentines to the West. “If we do not reach that time, then our children and grandchildren will reach it, and they will sell your sons as slaves at the slave market.”

In October, *Dabiq*, the magazine of the Islamic State, published “The Revival of Slavery Before the Hour,” an article that took up the question of whether Yazidis (the members of an ancient Kurdish sect that borrows elements of Islam, and had come under attack from Islamic State forces in northern Iraq) are lapsed Muslims, and therefore marked for death, or merely pagans and therefore fair game for enslavement. A study group of Islamic State scholars had convened, on government orders, to resolve this issue. If they are pagans, the article’s anonymous author wrote, “Yazidi women and children [are to be] divided according to the Shariah amongst the fighters of the Islamic State who participated in the Sinjar operations [in northern Iraq] … Enslaving the families of the *kuffar* [infidels] and taking their women as concubines is a firmly established aspect of the Shariah that if one were to deny or mock, he would be denying or mocking the verses of the Koran and the narrations of the Prophet … and thereby apostatizing from Islam.”

**Territory**

Tens of thousands of foreign Muslims are thought to have immigrated to the Islamic State. Recruits hail from France, the United Kingdom, Belgium, Germany, Holland, Australia, Indonesia, the United States, and many other places. Many have come to fight, and many intend to die.

Peter R. Neumann, a professor at King’s College London, told me that online voices have been essential to spreading propaganda and ensuring that newcomers know what to believe. Online recruitment has also widened the demographics of the jihadist community, by allowing conservative Muslim women—physically isolated in their homes—to reach out to recruiters, radicalize, and arrange passage to Syria. Through its appeals to both genders, the Islamic State hopes to build a complete society.

The last caliphate was the Ottoman empire, which reached its peak in the 16th century and then experienced a long decline, until the founder of the Republic of Turkey, Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, euthanized it in 1924. But many supporters of the Islamic State, don’t acknowledge that caliphate as legitimate, because it didn’t fully enforce Islamic law, which requires stonings and slavery and amputations, and because its caliphs were not descended from the tribe of the Prophet, the Quraysh.

Baghdadi spoke at length of the importance of the caliphate in his Mosul sermon. He said that to revive the institution of the caliphate—which had not functioned except in name for about 1,000 years—was a communal obligation. He and his loyalists had “hastened to declare the caliphate and place an imam” at its head, he said. “This is a duty upon the Muslims—a duty that has been lost for centuries … The Muslims sin by losing it, and they must always seek to establish it.” Like bin Laden before him, Baghdadi spoke floridly, with frequent scriptural allusion and command of classical rhetoric. Unlike bin Laden, and unlike those false caliphs of the Ottoman empire, he is Qurayshi.

The caliphate is not just a political entity but also a vehicle for salvation. Islamic State propaganda regularly reports the pledges of *baya’a* (allegiance) rolling in from jihadist groups across the Muslim world. Cerantonio quoted a Prophetic saying, that to die without pledging allegiance is to die *jahil* (ignorant) and therefore die a “death of disbelief.” Consider how Muslims (or, for that matter, Christians) imagine God deals with the souls of people who die without learning about the one true religion. They are neither obviously saved nor definitively condemned.

To be the caliph, one must meet conditions outlined in Sunni law—being a Muslim adult man of Quraysh descent; exhibiting moral probity and physical and mental integrity; and having *’amr*, or authority. This last criterion, is the hardest to fulfill, and requires that the caliph have territory in which he can enforce Islamic law.

Before the caliphate, “maybe 85 percent of the Sharia was absent from our lives,” Choudary told me. “These laws are in abeyance until we have *khilafa*”—a caliphate—“and now we have one.” Without a caliphate, for example, individual vigilantes are not obliged to amputate the hands of thieves they catch in the act. But create a caliphate, and this law, along with a huge body of other jurisprudence, suddenly awakens. In theory, all Muslims are obliged to immigrate to the territory where the caliph is applying these laws. One of Choudary’s prize students, a convert from Hinduism named Abu Rumaysah, evaded police to bring his family of five from London to Syria in November. On the day I met Choudary, Abu Rumaysah tweeted out a picture of himself with a Kalashnikov in one arm and his newborn son in the other. Hashtag: #GenerationKhilafah.

The caliph is required to implement Sharia. Any deviation will compel those who have pledged allegiance to inform the caliph in private of his error and, in extreme cases, to excommunicate and replace him if he persists. (“I have been plagued with this great matter, plagued with this responsibility, and it is a heavy responsibility,” Baghdadi said in his sermon.) In return, the caliph commands obedience—and those who persist in supporting non-Muslim governments, after being duly warned and educated about their sin, are considered apostates.

**The Apocalypse**

All Muslims acknowledge that God is the only one who knows the future. But they also agree that he has offered us a peek at it, in the Koran and in narrations of the Prophet. 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. It is in this casting that the Islamic State is most boldly distinctive from its predecessors, and clearest in the religious nature of its mission.

In broad strokes, al-Qaeda acts like an underground political movement, with worldly goals in sight at all times—the expulsion of non-Muslims from the Arabian peninsula, the abolishment of the state of Israel, the end of support for dictatorships in Muslim lands. The Islamic State has its share of worldly concerns (including, in the places it controls, collecting garbage and keeping the water running), but the End of Days is a leitmotif of its propaganda. Bin Laden rarely mentioned the apocalypse, and when he did, he seemed to presume that he would be long dead when the glorious moment of divine comeuppance finally arrived. “Bin Laden and Zawahiri are from elite Sunni families who look down on this kind of speculation and think it’s something the masses engage in,” says Will McCants of the Brookings Institution, who is writing a book about the Islamic State’s apocalyptic thought.

During the last years of the U.S. occupation of Iraq, the Islamic State’s immediate founding fathers, by contrast, saw signs of the end times everywhere. They were anticipating, within a year, the arrival of the Mahdi—a messianic figure destined to lead the Muslims to victory before the end of the world. McCants says a prominent Islamist in Iraq approached bin Laden in 2008 to warn him that the group was being led by millenarians who were “talking all the time about the Mahdi and making strategic decisions” based on when they thought the Mahdi was going to arrive. “Al-Qaeda had to write to [these leaders] to say ‘Cut it out.’ ”

For certain true believers—the kind who long for epic good-versus-evil battles—visions of apocalyptic bloodbaths fulfill a deep psychological need. Of the Islamic State supporters I met, Musa Cerantonio, the Australian, expressed the deepest interest in the apocalypse and how the remaining days of the Islamic State—and the world—might look. Parts of that prediction are original to him, and do not yet have the status of doctrine. But other parts are based on mainstream Sunni sources and appear all over the Islamic State’s propaganda. These include the belief that there will be only 12 legitimate caliphs, and 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.

The Islamic State has attached great importance to the Syrian city of Dabiq, near Aleppo. It named its propaganda magazine after the town, and celebrated madly when (at great cost) it conquered Dabiq’s strategically unimportant plains. 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.

“Dabiq is basically all farmland,” one Islamic State supporter recently tweeted. “You could imagine large battles taking place there.” The Islamic State’s propagandists drool with anticipation of this event, and constantly imply that it will come soon. The state’s magazine quotes Zarqawi as saying, “The spark has been lit here in Iraq, and its heat will continue to intensify … until it burns the crusader armies in Dabiq.” A recent propaganda video shows clips from Hollywood war movies set in medieval times—perhaps because many of the prophecies specify that the armies will be on horseback or carrying ancient weapons.

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. Western media frequently miss references to Dabiq in the Islamic State’s videos, and focus instead on lurid scenes of beheading. “Here we are, burying the first American crusader in Dabiq, eagerly waiting for the remainder of your armies to arrive,” said a masked executioner in a November video, showing the severed head of Peter (Abdul Rahman) Kassig, the aid worker who’d been held captive for more than a year. During fighting in Iraq in December, after mujahideen (perhaps inaccurately) reported having seen American soldiers in battle, Islamic State Twitter accounts erupted in spasms of pleasure, like overenthusiastic hosts or hostesses upon the arrival of the first guests at a party.

The Prophetic narration that foretells the Dabiq battle refers to the enemy as Rome. Who “Rome” is, now that the pope has no army, remains a matter of debate. But Cerantonio makes a case that Rome meant the Eastern Roman empire, which had its capital in what is now Istanbul. We should think of Rome as the Republic of Turkey—the same republic that ended the last self-identified caliphate, 90 years ago. Other Islamic State sources suggest that Rome might mean any infidel army, and the Americans will do nicely.

After its battle in Dabiq, Cerantonio said, the caliphate will expand and sack Istanbul. Some believe it will then cover the entire Earth, but Cerantonio suggested its tide may never reach beyond the Bosporus. An anti-Messiah, known in Muslim apocalyptic literature as 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.

“Only God knows” whether the Islamic State’s armies are the ones foretold, Cerantonio said. But he is hopeful. “The Prophet said that one sign of the imminent arrival of the End of Days is that people will for a long while stop talking about the End of Days,” he said. “If you go to the mosques now, you’ll find the preachers are silent about this subject.” On this theory, even setbacks dealt to the Islamic State mean nothing, since God has preordained the near-destruction of his people anyway. The Islamic State has its best and worst days ahead of it.

**The Fight**

The ideological purity of the Islamic State has one compensating virtue: it allows us to predict some of the group’s actions. Osama bin Laden was seldom predictable. He ended his first television interview cryptically. CNN’s Peter Arnett asked him, “What are your future plans?” Bin Laden replied, “You’ll see them and hear about them in the media, God willing.” By contrast, the Islamic State boasts openly about its plans—not all of them, but enough so that by listening carefully, we can deduce how it intends to govern and expand.

In London, Choudary and his students provided detailed descriptions of how the Islamic State must conduct its foreign policy, now that it is a caliphate. It has already taken up what Islamic law refers to as “offensive jihad,” the forcible expansion into countries that are ruled by non-Muslims. “Hitherto, we were just defending ourselves,” Choudary said; without a caliphate, offensive jihad is an inapplicable concept. But the waging of war to expand the caliphate is an essential duty of the caliph.

It’s hard to overstate how hamstrung the Islamic State will be by its radicalism. The modern international system, born of the 1648 Peace of Westphalia, relies on each state’s willingness to recognize borders, however grudgingly. For the Islamic State, that recognition is ideological suicide. Other Islamist groups, such as the Muslim Brotherhood and Hamas, have succumbed to the blandishments of democracy and the potential for an invitation to the community of nations, complete with a UN seat. Negotiation and accommodation have worked, at times, for the Taliban as well. (Under Taliban rule, Afghanistan exchanged ambassadors with Saudi Arabia, Pakistan, and the United Arab Emirates, an act that invalidated the Taliban’s authority in the Islamic State’s eyes.) To the Islamic State these are not options, but acts of apostasy.

And the response:

What the Atlantic Left Out About ISIS According to their own Expert

Jack Jenkins, February 20, 2015, ThinkProgress

Since Monday, much has been said in [print](http://www.motherjones.com/kevin-drum/2015/02/american-public-becoming-ever-more-rabid-war-against-isis), [radio](http://thedianerehmshow.org/shows/2015-02-18/new-efforts-to-block-the-growing-threat-of-isis), and [television](http://www.cnn.com/videos/tv/2015/02/19/gk-graeme-wood-on-isis.cnn) about Graeme Wood’s recent front-page feature piece for *The Atlantic* entitled “[What ISIS Really Wants](http://www.theatlantic.com/features/archive/2015/02/what-isis-really-wants/384980/).” The article, which is lengthy and highly descriptive, is essentially an exhaustive examination of the ideology that shores up the cruel vision, messages, and tactics of ISIS, the radical militant group currently terrorizing entire sections of the Middle East. But while the article was initially met with widespread praise, it has since become the subject of criticism and even condemnation from several groups, including [Muslim academics](http://www.salon.com/2015/02/19/the_atlantics_big_islam_lie_what_muslims_really_believe_about_isis/), [scholars of Islamic law](http://thinkprogress.org/world/2015/02/18/3624121/atlantic-gets-dangerously-wrong-isis-islam/), [Muslim leaders](http://www.rawstory.com/rs/2015/02/americas-most-prominent-muslim-says-the-atlantic-is-doing-pr-for-isis/) and high-profile [political](http://douthat.blogs.nytimes.com/2015/02/18/in-defense-of-islam/?_r=0) [pundits](http://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/fareed-zakaria/2015/02/05/bd439ca6-ad7d-11e4-9c91-e9d2f9fde644_story.html).

Critics have elucidated a slew of issues with the piece, but many are rooted in quotes by Bernard Haykel, a professor of Near Eastern Studies at Princeton University who Wood quotes extensively to justify his claims. When ThinkProgress spoke with other scholars in Haykel’s field, however, at least one expressed surprise at his involvement with the piece, and indicated curiosity about the scholar’s thoughts on the final product.

With this in mind, ThinkProgress reached out to Haykel, who agreed to an interview to help dispel any misconception that he is trying to score “political” points, explaining, “my approach is a scholarly one and not motivated by an agenda.” He admitted that he had initially read Wood’s article quickly — “it’s a long piece,” he joked — and declined to directly address most of Wood’s claims other than to insist the piece was ultimately “[Wood’s] argument … not my argument.” Still, he didn’t shy away from expanding on some things the author left out or possibly misrepresented, and offered a revealing examination of what’s at stake when fighting ISIS.

ISIS is ahistorical, revisionist, but not inevitable

One of the oft-mentioned criticisms of *The Atlantic* piece is that it echoed the inaccurate belief that since ISIS’s theology draws upon Islamic texts to justify its horrendous practices, it is an inevitable product of Islam. Haykel didn’t say whether or not he thought Wood’s article says as much, but when ThinkProgress asked him directly whether Islamic texts and theology necessitate the creation of groups like ISIS, he was unequivocal.

“No,” he said. “I think that ISIS is a product of very contingent, contextual, historical factors. There is nothing predetermined in Islam that would lead to ISIS.” He was similarly unambiguous when responding to the related critique that Muslims who disavow ISIS are somehow deluded or not “real” Muslims. “I consider people … who have criticized ISIS to be fully within the Islamic tradition, and in no way ‘less Muslim’ than ISIS,” he said. “I mean, that’s absurd.”

Haykel’s position also helped explain several problematic constructions and omissions in Wood’s article. At one point, for instance, Wood quotes Haykel as saying, “The only principled ground that the Islamic State’s opponents could take is to say that certain core texts and traditional teachings of Islam are no longer valid.” The journalist then adds the following conclusion: “That really would be an act of apostasy.”

The implication, according to many who read the piece, is that ISIS’s theology is founded in Islamic texts that cannot be debated. Haykel, however, clarified that while he saw ISIS as rooted in authentic Islamic texts, those texts are not above interpretation, and it is *only* ISIS and related groups — not Islam as a whole — who would consider such challenges apostasy.

“If Muslims start criticizing these texts that ISIS is using, saying that they are no longer relevant or no longer applicable, ISIS would declare them apostate,” Haykel said. “If you start telling ISIS that following a tradition of the prophet has been abrogated, has been superseded by some other tradition or some other verse, or that it’s no longer valid, or that it applies only to the seventh century but not today because we’re modern, you will be declared an apostate on the spot by ISIS.”

The issue, Haykel says, lies in ISIS’s “ahistorical” theology, which justifies their horrific actions by essentially pretending the last several centuries of Islamic history never happened. “This is something I did point out to [Wood] but he didn’t bring out in the piece: ISIS’s representation of Islam is ahistorical,” Haykel said. “It’s saying we have to go back to the seventh century. It’s denying the legal complexity of the [Islamic] legal tradition over a thousand years.”

To illustrate his point, Haykel referenced Mohammad Fadel, the Associate Professor and Research Chair for the Law and Economics of Islamic Law at the University of Toronto, who criticized Wood’s piece in a recent [interview with ThinkProgress](http://thinkprogress.org/world/2015/02/18/3624121/atlantic-gets-dangerously-wrong-isis-islam/). “Mohammad Fadel, for instance, would say when you talk about Islamic law, you have to talk about a tradition that is many centuries old and is extremely sophisticated, that has a multiplicity of views and opinions and is not cut and dry the way ISIS presents Islam, in an ahistorical fashion, and in a completely monolithic way,” Haykel said. “So ISIS’s view of Islam is … unhistorical. They’re revising history.”

Is ISIS Islamic?

Haykel expanded on some of his comments from Wood’s piece, but he also fervently stood by others, especially his belief that ISIS is, in fact, an Islamic group. Wood’s article includes the following paragraph citing Haykel as he expressed frustration with people — [including President Barack Obama](http://www.slate.com/blogs/the_slatest/2015/02/19/isis_is_islamic_but_obama_is_right_not_to_describe_it_that_way.html) — who disavow ISIS as “unIslamic”:

But Muslims who call the Islamic State un-Islamic are typically, as the Princeton scholar Bernard Haykel, the leading expert on the group’s theology, told me, “embarrassed and politically correct, with a cotton-candy view of their own religion” that neglects “what their religion has historically and legally required.” Many denials of the Islamic State’s religious nature, he said, are rooted in an “interfaith-Christian-nonsense tradition.”

Haykel told ThinkProgress he still supported these claims, although he explained he was specifically referring to two groups of people who declare ISIS unIslamic: Muslims he says are “just ignorant” of Islam’s legal and political history, and Christians who engage in what he called “the Christian tradition of interfaith dialogue” and declare Islam a “religion of peace.”

Haykel singled out CNN talk show host Fareed Zakaria as an example of the former, who [recently said](http://transcripts.cnn.com/TRANSCRIPTS/1502/03/lvab.02.html) ISIS’s public execution of a Jordanian pilot by burning him to death — which at least one prominent Muslim cleric in the Middle East also [decried](http://www.cnn.com/2015/02/05/world/egypt-grand-mufti-interview/) as “away from humanity, much less religions” — is “entirely haram,” or forbidden in Islam. “That’s actually factually wrong — the burning apostates is in the [Islamic] legal code,” Haykel said.

Still, Haykel said his frustration with people of faith who try to disavow religious extremists is not limited to Islam. “[They] present Islam as ‘Oh, Islam is a religion of peace,’” Haykel said. “Well, what does that mean? I mean, Christianity is sometimes a religion of peace, and sometimes a religion of war, depending on what time we’re talking about. There’s no such thing as a religion of peace.”

“Islam doesn’t have a monopoly on violence, neither does Christianity. There are people who do things in the name of a religion and who really believe that they are doing God’s bidding. I think the Crusaders, when they were killing Jews and Muslims, really thought that this is what God wanted of them. Just like ISIS, today, when it does the killing of Shiites and Sunnis they consider to be apostates, really feel that they’re doing God’s bidding. They’re genuine believers.”

Haykel readily acknowledged there are numerous Islamic scriptures “that advocate a more kind of pacifist, less violent, and, in fact, an even tolerant and open-minded [religion that is] accepting of, let’s say, non-Muslims.” But he concluded that the texts ISIS pulls from still exist within the Islamic tradition, thus making them Islamic. “ISIS draws inspiration from Islamic traditions and Islamic texts — a very particular reading of that tradition and those texts — and it should be described and labeled as an extremist Islamic movement, or an Islamist [political] movement,” he said.

“The Sunni Muslim community, under normal circumstances … [historically] had mechanisms for silencing or eliminating extremists who would emerge from among them,” Haykel said. “[But] Sunni Muslims feel really beleaguered today … It’s very hard for Sunnis to say, today, ‘Let’s go and fight ISIS militarily,’ when you also have, let’s say, the Assad regime killing hundreds of thousands of Sunni Muslims, or Iran and its forces in Iraq and Syria and Lebanon also attacking Sunnis at the same time. In a world where a lot of people are attacking Sunnis, it’s hard for Sunnis to say ‘ISIS is the only bad group.’” “In other words, ISIS is a bad group and [Sunnis] don’t agree with it, but there are also other bad groups that are just as bad if not worse — at least in terms of [number of people] killed.”

Haykel said this sense of being under siege, when combined with several economic realities, is primarily why “a small sample of people” find ISIS’s ideology attractive. To the few who are able to get past ISIS’s obsessions with violence, their black-flag-waving conquests offer a sense of purpose — and, frankly, employment — amidst an otherwise frustrating existence.

“The reason ISIS emerged clearly has to do with the chaos in Iraq, the disenfranchisement of the Sunnis of Iraq (which is the result of the American invasion-occupation), and the chaos in Syria (which is a regime that has also disenfranchised Sunni Muslims),” he said. “We have two big Arab countries, side-by-side, both in chaos, both with large Sunni populations that are disenfranchised … With a lot of young men who have no prospects for employment and feel marginalized. And who then identify their sense of humiliation and marginalization with the larger Muslim world, which they claim is also being marginalized and being humiliated.”

“Let’s say you were an Iraqi, and you’ve had your entire family wiped out by the Shia government of Baghdad. Or you’ve seen your sister raped, or your brother tortured. Then you feel like you have nothing to lose, and the only way to respond to this is to resort to violence. And ISIS provides a ready-made ideology and package and movement to express that sense of rage.”

Taken together, Haykel’s comments appeared to argue that effectively combating ISIS will require more than discerning what “ISIS wants,” theologically speaking. Instead, it also requires a deep, abiding dedication to providing what most Muslims in the region want, and what Wood only briefly addresses in his article: stability, jobs, education, and, most of all, peace.