

ISIS: A Very Specific Type of Cult

The media and US administrations have struggled, since 2014, to define ISIS. Many don't even get its name right. The group is known by several acronyms: ISIL (Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant), ISIS (Islamic State of Iraq and Es-Sham – Sham being the Arabic word for the Levant) and DAESH (the same acronym using Arabic words). It is not surprising then, that a definition of this group is far from simple.

Some have said ISIS is not Islamic at all, which, while well meaning, lacks credibility and seems to fail on its face, as ISIS quotes Islamic texts to justify their actions. The idea supporting this concept is that the beliefs of ISIS are very different from that of the large majority of Muslims, and if we then, in any way use the word Islamic to define ISIS, we will insult Muslims around the world. While some political leaders assert that ISIS is not Islamic at all, and Muslim scholars don't consider the teachings of ISIS as Islamic, they do acknowledge that ISIS uses Islamic texts and slogans and even an Islamic flag. ISIS's recruiting efforts are not focused on the population in general, but among Muslims. They are recruiting Muslims who think they are joining a Muslim organization. The position of Muslim scholars is that ISIS's teachings have a foundation in Islamic texts, but have greatly deviated from true Islam and have become unrecognizable as Islamic by the vast majority of Muslims. This is clearly seen in the Open Letter to Al-Baghdadi where several hundred scholars argue from a religious frame of reference to counter ISIS' interpretation of Islamic texts.

We cannot claim that ISIS has not used Islamic texts and symbols. They do use them, but in a twisted and much deformed interpretation and application. At the same time, it is incumbent upon us all to sympathize with the vast majority of Muslims, who say that ISIS is so different from them that they don't want to be associated with ISIS at all. Muslims around the world are indignant about ISIS and angry at how ISIS has hijacked the representation of their religion. We need to acknowledge and support the desire of Muslims to distance themselves from this group.

Others have advocated that ISIS is actually practicing the true version of Islam. While ISIS' **interpretation** of Islamic texts can seem coherent, it is often taken out of context, sometimes relying on only a part of a sentence to justify a doctrine and fails to take into account texts which contradict their stated positions. This greatly differs from how conservative Muslims and Christians interpret their scriptures. Scholars clearly agree that these texts need to be examined within their context. If Christians interpreted the Bible in the manner ISIS interprets Islamic texts, you would see pastors citing Joshua's Old Testament mandate to destroy every living creature in a certain city. The current application would then be to go to the neighboring town and kill everyone. Christians wouldn't accept this as valid because it would obviously be out of context and not reflect the ethics and precepts of the Bible in its totality.

Still, others claim that acts of barbarism done by a group automatically excludes it from being followers of a major religion. In fact, it is not religion that is the primary predictor of brutality, but often the ethnic and religious tensions that are present during the formation of nation states. The 20th century was filled with numerous widespread acts of violence. An immediate example is the genocide committed by the Nazis. The 40% of US POW's killed (many of them beheaded) by the Japanese during WWII were part of an ideology that the Allies strongly thought came from religious (State Shinto) beliefs. The millions killed under Stalin and Mao, and the huge piles of human skulls found in Cambodia after Pol Pot's reign, plus the hacked up bodies in Rwanda are further examples. Croatian ultranationalists killed hundreds of thousands of Serbs during the 1940s and forcibly converted hundreds of thousands more to Catholicism. More recently we saw the ultranationalistic and religious massacres in Bosnia and Serbia. We propose that barbarism is not unique to any one religion or belief system, but something that cuts across humanity. **Barbarism is tied to the condition of the human heart.**

How then, should we refer to ISIS? We propose that it be referred to as a cult. A very specific type of cult. **ISIS is an Apocalyptic, UltraNationalist, Genocidal, Islamic Cult.**

ISIS is **Apocalyptic**. An apocalyptic emphasis is a hallmark of many cults. Proclaiming that the end is near is often a key motivation to recruit and energize followers. For ISIS, this is evidenced in their emphasis of end times and the battles they believe signal this period. This is tied to martyrdom, which is also a key ISIS recruiting tool. One of their major media recruiting platforms is their online magazine, Dabiq. Dabiq is a city in northern Syria, near the Turkish border. ISIS believes that it is here that Muslims will defeat invading Christians in a battle similar to Armageddon, thereby restoring the glory of Islam and righting injustices committed against them. If we do not understand the apocalyptic aspect of ISIS, we will not understand them at all. The hope of this apocalyptic victory provides a sense of purpose, and is a factor in their ability to recruit Muslims from around the world.

ISIS is **Ultranationalist**. Iraq had been ruled by Saddam Hussein's Ba'ath party for decades. The Ba'ath party sought to establish its legitimacy by appealing to Arab nationalism and, in doing so, alienated and persecuted the ethnic minorities of the nation of Iraq, even if they were also Muslims. It's not a surprise, then, that both ISIS and their Shia counterparts, whose leaders grew up under and were subjected to Saddam's Ba'athi propaganda, engage in a language of ultranationalism, and that many of its followers are remnants of the old Ba'athi regime. The difference between Saddam and his Sunni and Shia successors is the identity marker they employ in their nationalism – Arabism for one, and a particular religious interpretation for the other.

ISIS, like many ultranationalist movements throughout history, is **Genocidal**. On March 17, 2016 the US State Department confirmed what many human rights organizations have been stating for the last several years: ISIS is responsible for genocide in the regions they control. The plight of the Yazidis has been widespread in the media, yet Muslims and Christians in the region have suffered as well. In fact, ISIS has killed more Muslims than Christians or Yazidis because Muslims make up the great majority of the region's population. The strategy of ISIS is to kill men and use women to propagate more followers.

For the reasons stated above, ISIS is also **Islamic** in the sense that **they use Islamic texts and symbols to provide legitimacy for their ideology**. While many argue that they have little or nothing in common with Islam as it is widely practiced, it is clear that the roots of their beliefs are derived from Islamic sources. Some political leaders say that Americans will confuse all Muslims with ISIS if we use the word Islamic when defining them. Yet we believe that Americans are able to distinguish between traditional proponents of a religion and a distorted offshoot, also known as a **Cult**.

Muslims are now referring to ISIS with an Arabic term which is really the dynamic equivalent of the English word cult. In several recent interviews, and at the 2017 National Prayer Breakfast, King Abdullah II of Jordan referred to ISIS as "**Khawarij**". Hamza Yusuf, one of the most influential Muslim-American scholars, and a co-founder of the first Muslim college in the USA, also uses Khawarij to refer to ISIS. This word literally means "those who have gone out" or "outsiders" and refers to a group of Muslims soon after Mohamed who opposed his fourth successor, Ali.

When Ali's predecessor Othman was murdered, the Khawarij started a civil war, initiating the doctrine of Takfir or excommunication, whereby they declared their Muslim opponents to not be Muslims. They also developed extreme doctrines and were very intolerant. ISIS uses the doctrine of Takfir to justify killing Muslims who don't agree with their particular interpretation of Islam. Like the Khawarij of old, ISIS seeks out and murders Muslim scholars who disagree with their vision of Islam. The fact that prominent Muslim leaders (including Imam Magid), are using the term Khawarij demonstrates they acknowledge that ISIS represents a deformation of Islam, and is a cult.

Since "cult" is a term that is used for a group that has widely deviated from generally accepted religious beliefs, let's look at five elements of a cult and see if they apply to ISIS.

1. An **authoritarian, charismatic leader** who demands total obedience and respect. The adherents demonstrate zealous and unwavering commitment to him. The leader is not accountable to anyone else and is in total control. He is the only one who can correctly interpret the beliefs that the adherents must follow. As does ISIS, the leader takes phrases out of context to arrive at startling conclusions. Abu Bakr Al-Baghdadi certainly fits this profile.
2. A claim to holding **exclusive truth**. As is common with most cults, ISIS claims that they are the only ones who have the truth, and that others, even who follow the teachings of the same holy books, are believed to be in error. The doctrine of Takfir or excommunication, that ISIS uses to kill other self-proclaimed Muslims, makes clear their claim to exclusivity of truth.
3. **Dissent is discouraged and punished**. As made clear by the Takfiri doctrine, ISIS does not tolerate any interpretations of Islam apart from their own.
4. **Very high control of their adherents**. They forbid their adherents from reading books other than the ones they approve and they have a long list of the Muslim scholars they have black listed. As part of their recruiting they tell people to not listen to their local Imams because they are not true Muslims. They also forbid adherents spending time with those (even family members) outside the cult. **The leader dictates how adherents must think, act and feel**, sometimes in great detail: specifying who they marry, how many children they should have, what job to take, what type of clothes to wear and where to live. ISIS does all of the above. They have a female police force that enforces clothing restrictions. They give their soldiers captured women as slaves/wives, and they have a central "government" that provides salaries for everyone. We have not seen any group in our lifetime that has such high control as ISIS.
5. **Punishment and ostracism of adherents who choose to leave the cult**. In the USA this often means shunning, but in some cases bodily harm. With ISIS, there are numerous stories of the execution of members who try to leave.

In the USA, we have seen many well-known cults which are derived from most every world religion. Most of these are just groups that stay to themselves and recruit more followers. Some, however, have become violent as well. Two recent, well-known examples of violent American cults are:

1. **The Peoples Temple of the Disciples of Christ**, led by **Jim Jones**. This ended at their camp in Guyana in 1978 with mass suicide, killing almost 1,000 adherents. This was prompted by the visit of Congressman Leo Ryan from San Francisco who had come to investigate complaints of his constituents. The Congressman and three journalists were shot at the local airstrip. This was the greatest single loss of American civilian life in a deliberate act prior to September 11, 2001.
2. **The Branch Davidians** led by **David Koresh**. He had changed his name from Howell to Koresh after Cyrus the Great of Persia, claiming to be a prophet. He was accused of child abuse and statutory rape, as well as firearms violations. In 1993, the ATF raided their compound in Waco, TX, and after a long standoff, 90 of the adherents were killed along with Koresh. Two years later, on the same day the siege ended (April 19), Timothy McVeigh and Terry Nichols bombed a federal building in Oklahoma City, citing the siege against the Branch Davidians. This was an American precursor to the inspired lone wolf attacks we now see promulgated by ISIS.

ISIS well fits the definition of a cult. We have seen a number of cults in America that have turned violent so we believe that this term is one Americans can understand. It describes a group that originated from a traditional religious thought, but goes terribly astray. American cults have been much smaller in size than ISIS, but ISIS still represents a very small fraction of Muslims worldwide. We need to clearly call out ISIS as a cult, but at the same time affirm that the vast majority of Muslims are peace loving citizens of the countries in which they live.

We think that by labeling ISIS an **Apocalyptic, Ultranationalist, Genocidal, Islamic Cult** we will be able to put ISIS in its proper context. Maybe the government would want to create a new acronym to describe ISIS: AUGIC. It even sounds a bit like allergic.

***Imam Mohamed Magid** is the Executive Imam of the All Dulles Area Muslim Society (ADAMS) Center in Sterling, VA. He was invited to perform the Muslim call to prayer at the 58th Inaugural Prayer Service on January 21, 2017. In 2016, the FBI gave the ADAMS Center the Director's Community Leadership Award for "their leadership role in building partnerships between law enforcement and the Muslim community to enhance mutual cooperation and public safety." He is a past president of the Islamic Society of North America and has been listed one of the 500 most influential Muslims in the world.*

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