Priming Strategic Communications: Countering the Appeal of ISIS

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ABSTRACT: This article examines the Islamist rationale used by the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) to recruit and sustain its members. It proposes counter-narratives using Islamist thinking to challenge the veracity of ISIS thought and action. A counter-ISIS information campaign is proposed to persuade potential recruits and current members that joining ISIS violates basic Islamic principles.

In his September 10, 2014 address to the United Nations, President Obama said of the jihadist group Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS), "The only language understood by killers like this is the language of force."[1] The president then announced that the United States would lead an air campaign against ISIS targets, partnering with Arab and European forces, Iraqi forces would conduct the bulk of the ground combat.

The application of military force alone is not likely to defeat ISIS, especially given the reluctance of the United States and other regional powers to commit ground forces. The United States must reach for other instruments of power, including the use of *information operations* to increase its capacity to degrade and defeat ISIS. Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff General Martin Dempsey makes this point specifically, calling for a "whole of government" approach challenging ISIS' religious claims: "In particular, stripping away their cloak of religious legitimacy behind which they hide."[2]

The real vulnerability of ISIS is not its brutality, which seems to draw followers, but rather its claim to be a true Islamic group, when its operations significantly violate fundamental Islamic tenets. The writings of the very Islamic theorists who are considered foundations of *jihadi* Sunni Islam contradict ISIS's claims concerning the religious legitimacy of their actions, and the most legitimate source of Islam, the Qur'an,

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1   The ISIS use of terms can be confusing; it once called itself the "Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant," (ISIL), which can have an expanded meaning over the ISIS concept, as the "Levant" includes Lebanon and, for some political geographers, Israel and Jordan. The author appreciates helpful suggestions from W. Andrew Terrill, Jacqueline Whitt, and Christopher Hemmer. Any remaining errors are the author's alone.

2   Jim Garamone, "Anti-ISIL Campaign Will Take Time, Dempsey Says," US Joint Chiefs of Staff, September 26, 2014, http://www.jcs.mil/Media/News/tabid/3887/Article/11272/anti-isil-campaign-will-take-time-dempsey-says.aspx.

specifically forbids many of ISIS' actions.[3] Remove its claim of religious legitimization of murder and destruction, and ISIS becomes only a criminal enterprise. As ISIS uses Islam to recruit and motivate members, its embrace of Islam may ultimately expose it as a naked emperor, who has distorted the core of Islam to the point where ISIS members may be guilty of the very crime it attaches to its Muslim victims—apostasy.[4]

The confrontation with ISIS is the latest in a series of hostilities that the United States has had with radical Islamist-inspired groups, and US policy makers have almost always developed a counter-radical Islam operation as a part of a larger strategy to defeat these groups. Previous campaigns have tried to block Islamist messages, or offered pro-American missives (including American music and cooking), or using "de-radicalized" Muslims to counter radical imagery. Other operations have killed the messenger (Bin Laden, Anwar al-Awlaqi, for examples). Current campaigns show no changes — in August 2014, the US State Department's Center for Strategic Counterterrorism Communications launched a media campaign to counter ISIS. It distributed videos showing a beheaded corpse and other savagery committed, calling upon potential recruits to "think again, turn away." In contrast, ISIS wages a slick social media campaign offering all the advantages of jihad ("jihad is a cure for depression," and "you can even bring your family"). The effectiveness of the State Department's campaign can be measured even in social media; an ISIS jihadi got 32 "favorites" for his recruiting hashtag, at the same time, the State Department's posting got zero. Efforts to counter ISIS propaganda continue to fall short, as ISIS recruiting success indicates; ISIS enrolled over 6,000 new members in June 2014, according to one source.[5] It is time to invest more heavily in counter-ISIS information campaigns that use Salafiyya Islam itself to counter the ISIS appeal.

This essay briefly discusses *Salafiyya* thought, the supposed source of ISIS thinking and inspiration. It then compares these foundations to ISIS doctrine and actions, showing how ISIS actions far exceed even *Salafist* doctrine, and concludes with recommendations for an information campaign designed to use Islam itself as a deterrent for Muslims interested in joining ISIS.

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3   This article is not specifically about *jihad*, as the concept covers multiple Islamist movements. The term is probably the most controversial and misunderstood in the corpus of Islam, so definitions are quite complex. Specifically, *jihad* refers to legal doctrine, including the questions of when, and whom, to fight, laws of war, and the desired outcome of fighting. Some Muslim writers argue for a "greater jihad" involving personal struggles against temptation, but this is largely a Sufi (Muslim mystic) ideation. Because there is no single definition of *jihad*, the term is widely appropriated by various Islamist groups to justify a wide range of behaviors. Michael Bonner, *Jihad in Islamic History* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press), 2006; David Cook, *Understanding Jihad* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005); John Esposito, *Unholy War* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002); and Giles Kepel, *Jihad: The Trail of Political Islam Cambridge* (MA: Harvard University Press, 2002). This article employs the term to denote Islamist groups who embrace fighting as an essential part of Islamic practice

4   Obviously not all of ISIS' victims are Muslims (the Yazidi and Christians are other religious groups savaged by ISIS), but given the population dominance of Muslims, they are by far the most numerous ISIS targets. Moreover, being an "unbeliever" is a less serious offense in ISIS' thinking than being an "apostate," a Muslim who has departed the faith, which is where ISIS puts the Shi'a and its variants.

5   "Islamic State 'Has 50,000 Fighters in Syria,'" *Al Jazeera*, August 19, 2014. The source for the numbers is the "Syrian Observatory for Human Rights," a small organization based in London whose data have been disputed. But even if the recruitment is off by half, the numbers still do not indicate that counter-Islamist information campaigns are working.

Salafiyya Thought

The parents of Taqi ad-Din Ahmad ibn Taymiyya were among the few to survive the Mongol decimation of Damascus in 1260. As Ibn Taymiyya reflected on the reasons for the Mongol devastation, he concluded that the fault lay not in Islam itself, but rather with Muslims who had become spiritually lax, distracted by religious reform, or influenced by what Ibn Taymiyya regarded as apostate forms of Islam, for example, the Sufi mystics, and the Alawi interpretation of Shi'a Islam).[6] He believed that the loss of Islamic zeal caused Muslim society to return to the early pre-Islamic days of ignorance and disorder (*jahiliyya*).[7] For Ibn Taymiyya and his later interpreters, the solution for the Islamic community was to return to the time of the Prophet Muhammad and his community of believers (the *al-salaf al-Salih* or "pious ancestors," thus the term *Salafiyya* for their followers), and to cast aside those innovations that, for Ibn Taymiyya, had weakened Islam.

Ibn Taymiyya's views had little influence during Caliphate times, as they would have challenged the governing codes and practices of most "caliphates." However, Salifiyyist thought has enjoyed a modern rebirth, in part because of its interpretation by Muhammad ibn Abd al-Wahab, whose writings inspired the movement contemporarily known as "Wahhabist" Sunni Islam.[8] Al-Wahab reconstructed Ibn Taymiyya's emphasis on a puritanical vision of Islam to prevent reform, foreign ideas, and practices (saintly veneration, or Sufi traditions), to weaken the Muslim community.[9] For the Egyptian Islamist Sayyid Qutb (1906-1966), *jahiliyya* was everywhere in Nasserist Egypt, governed, for Qutb, by Muslims in name only, who had neglected faith in their contrivance of modern governance, ruling *faux* Muslims who only pay lip service to their religion.[10] Qutb, whom Nasser had hanged in 1966, is one of the most influential Islamist thinkers for modern *jihadi*.

Components of Salifiyyist Belief

While return to the *salaf* is a desired endstate for its proponents, notions of *tawhid* and *takfir* are tools used to combat *jahiliyya*. They are hardly unique to ISIS, but ISIS has taken them to extremes not found

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6   The irony is Ibn Taymiyya himself came from Sufi origins, and was buried in a Sufi cemetery in Damascus.

7   Roxanne L. Euben and Muhammad Qasim Zaman (eds.), "'Abd Al-Salam Faraj" in *Princeton Readings in Islamist Thought* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2009), 323-324; Michael Doran, "The Pragmatic Fanaticism of al-Qaeda: An Anatomy of Extremism in Middle Eastern Politics." *Political Science Quarterly* 117 (2002): 179.

8   Henri Lauzière, "The Construction of Salafiyya: Reconsidering Salifism from the Perspective of Conceptual History," *International Journal of Middle Eastern Studies* 43 (2010): 369-389; Eleanor Abdella Doumato, "Manning the barricades: Islam according to Saudi Arabia's School Texts," *The Middle East Journal*, 57 (2003): 230-247; Natana J. DeLong-Bas, Wahhabi *Islam: From Revival and Reform to Global Jihad* (New York: Oxford University Press), 2004. Both Doumato and Delong-Bas argue that Saudi Arabia's ruling al-Saud family has influenced the teaching of Islam in general and even "Wahhabi" Islam in particular, omitting the reformist passages and even fabricating passages about the necessity for Muslims to kill Jews before Judgment Day (Doumato, 241).

9   Al-Wahab partnered with Muhammad al-Saud to start the first al-Saud state in the 18th century, though the Ottoman Empire sent Egyptian troops to that Islamist state in 1818.

10   John Calvert, *Sayyid Qutb and the Origins of Radical Islam* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010), 217-220.

even in the thinking of traditional *salifiyyists*.[11] Their metanarrative must be understood to develop counter-arguments to ISIS' "Islamic" claims.

Tawhid

Tawhid literally means the "oneness" of God, and is an essential element of Islam, which requires believers to reject the veneration of anything but God, including saintly worship and the Christian Trinity. However, many Sunni Muslims argue that Shi'a Muslim belief and ritual violate the nature of *tawhid* through the Shi'a elevation of their Imams (particularly Ali ibn Talib and Hussein ibn Ali, the son-in-law and the grandson of the Prophet) to partnership status with God. The differences between Shi'a and Sunni practices are considerable, and their reverence of the Prophet's son-in-law and cousin Ali ibn Talib and his son Hussein give fuel to the argument the Shi'a are apostates as their practices and thought violate *tawhid*.[12] The Shi'a reject this allegation, arguing that only early Shi'a extremists ever attempted to deify the Imamiyya, and continue to profess fidelity to God and God alone.[13] This has not prevented Sunni theorists from denouncing them; Ibn Taymiyya censured Shi'a beliefs and practices, reserving special scorn for the Ismaili Shi'a, whom he regarded as in jahiliyya, but concluded that most Shi'a (particularly the majority *Imami*, or "Twelver" Shi'a) are simply misguided Muslims.[14] Nowhere did he denounce them as *kufr*, or "unbelievers."[15] Sayyid Qutb, in one of his influential writings *In the Shade of the Qur'an*, states "Islam does not force people to accept its beliefs, rather it aims to provide an environment where people enjoy full freedom of belief."[16] For Qutb, ridding Islamic society of deviants would take a long-term educational effort, not mass murder.[17] Ibn Abd al-Wahab did not call for violence against the Shi'a, despite strong criticism of Shi'a "errors," but rather called for debate and logic as the weapons to be used against them.[18] And Saudi Arabia, where "Wahhabist" Islam forms the backbone of the Saudi State, has seen current King Abdullah welcome dialog with Saudi Arabian Shi'a, though tensions certainly remain.[19]

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11   There is no uniform understanding of *Salifiyyist* theology; some argue it prohibits all forms of rule, while others argue it prohibits rebellion against just rule. Abdulmajeed al-Buluwi, "Saudis Debate Salifism and Democracy," *Al-Monitor*, June 23, 2014. http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2014/06/saudi-arabia-debate-salafism-governance-isis.html.

12   Heinz Halm, *Shi'ism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004), 60-62; Moojan Momen, *An Introduction to Shi'a Islam* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1985), 178-183.

13   Momen, 176-177.

14   Tariq al-Jamil, "Ibn Taymiyya and Ibn al-Mutahhar al-Hilli: Shi'i Polemics and the Struggle for Religious Authority in Medieval Islam," in Yossef Rapoport and Shahab Ahmed (eds.), *Ibn Taymiyya and His Times* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 236-237.

15   Moreover, the one country that constructed its Sunni system indirectly inspired by Ibn Taymiyya has never declared its Shi'a population as unbelievers, and thus has not tried to force their conversion or eliminate them (though some Saudi Arabian leading religious figures have called for such actions) Toby Craig Jones, *Desert Kingdom: How Oil and Water Forged Modern Saudi Arabia* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2010), 18.

16   Sayyid Qutb, "In the Shade of the Quran," passage quoted in Roxanne L. Euben and Muhammad Qasim Zaman (eds.), *Princeton Readings in Islamic Thought: Texts and Contexts from al-Banna to Bin Laden* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2009), 146.

17   Emmanuel Sivan, *Radical Islam, Medieval Theology, and Modern Politics* (New Haven, CT: Yale University, 1985), 89.

18   DeLong-Bas: 90. It is important to distinguish between *thought* and *application*; Delong-Bas argues that both Saudi Arabian political leaders and jihadi movements like al-Qaeda gave a stricter interpretation of al-Wahhab than his writing warrant (227-280).

19   Toby Jones, "The Iraqi Effect in Saudi Arabia," *Middle East Report*, 237 (2005).

Yet ISIS ignores these arguments offered by Sunni theorists who are admired and emulated by *jihadi*; this note came from an ISIS spokesman:

> O soldiers of the Islamic State, what a great thing you have achieved by Allah!...He has healed the chests of the believers through the killing of the *nusayriyyah* (alawites) and *rafidah* (Shiites) at your hands.....O Sunnis of Iraq, the time has come for you to learn from the lessons of the past, and to learn that nothing will work with the *rafidah* other than slicing their throats and striking their necks.[20]

Thus, for ISIS, once a Muslim individual or group is accused of violating *tahwid*, they are eligible to be declared *takfir*. Christians suffered a similar fate, though technically not considered apostates as they never claimed Islamic status; they were not automatically put to death, but ISIS demanded that Iraqi Christians either pay a religious tax, convert, or die.[21]

Takfir

Takfir is both the process and outcome of the declaration of a Muslim's removal from the Islamic community (*u'mma*) because of deviation. From the time of the Umayyad Caliphate forward, some Sunni scholars and jurists specifically applied *takfir* to the Shi'a and their derivative groups, the Druze, the Alawi, and the Alevi, because they supposedly violated *tawhid*.[22] However, despite doctrinal and ritual differences, most Sunni scholarship does *not* refer to the Shi'a community as heretics, and the Shi'a as the minority within Islam did not generally threaten Sunni dominance of that community (the 10th-12th century Fatimid was one exception), until the rise of *political* Shi'a theory propagated by Ruhollah Khomeini.[23] While *takfir* has been a part of Islam from its earliest days, takfir trials were exceedingly rare until modern times.[24] Even the classic Islamist scholars like Abu Hamid Muhammad al-Ghazali and Ibn Taymiyya rejected *takfir* judgment, with al-Ghazali arguing that to question a Muslim's belief actually constitutes *unbelief*, and Ibn Taymiyya claimed that *takfir* was innovation, or *bida*, and thus impermissible.[25]

However, since the 1970s *jihadi* from many Islamist groups have been declaring *takfir* against almost any Muslim leader that they disagreed with,

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20 "ISIL Spokesman Vows 'Defeat' for America, Calls for Killing Westerners in New Message." *Hanin Networks Forum* (in Arabic), September 22, 2014.

21 "'They are Savages,' Say Christians Forced to Flee Mosul by ISIS," *The Guardian*, July 24, 2014. There are widespread reports on Christian websites of Christian crucifixions but they are difficult to validate.

22 Ibn Taymiyya personally participated in a campaign against Nusayri in Lebanon in 1305, reportedly describing them as "heretics, more heretical yet than Jews and Christians." Bernard Rougier, *Everyday Jihad: The Rise of Militant Islam among Palestinians in Lebanon (*Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007),162. For a discussion of the largely Turkish Alevi, see Kabir Tambar, *The Reckoning of Pluralism* Stanford (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2014).

23 Daniel Brumberg, "Khomeini's Legacy: Islamic Rule and Islamic Social Justice," in W. Scott Appleby (ed.), *Spokesmen for the Despised: Fundamentalist Leaders of the Middle East* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997), 16-82; Ray Takeyh, *Guardians of the Revolution: Iran and the World in the Age of the Ayatollahs* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), Ch. 1; Vali Nasr, *The Shia Revival: How Conflicts within Islam Will Shape the Future* (New York: W.W. Norton), Chs. 8-9. The reaction from the Sunni states in particular was as much due to Khomeini's claim as an Islamic revolutionary as it was to his Shi'a unorthodoxy.

24 Cook, 139.

25 As'ad AbuKhalil, "The Incoherence of Islamic Fundamentalism: Arab Islamic Thought at the End of the 20th Century," *Middle East Journal*, 48 (1994): 678-679.

partly due to the influence of Sayyid Qutb.[26] So many Tunisian Islamists painted their opponents as apostates that the Tunisian constitution of January 2014 contains a provision criminalizing the *takfir* practice.[27] The "Amman Message," composed by Jordan's King Abdullah II and endorsed by hundreds of Islamic leaders and scholars, declared that:

> …It is neither possible nor permissible to declare as apostates any group of Muslims who believes in God, Glorified and Exalted be He, and His Messenger (may peace and blessings be upon him) and the pillars of faith, and acknowledges the five pillars of Islam, and does not deny any necessarily self-evident tenet of religion.[28]

ISIS has embraced a radical vision of *takfir*, creating a long list of actions that would merit banishment, to include violations of *tawhid*, but also violations beyond it. They argue, for example, that when Muslims call upon non-Muslim members to join a coalition, they are infidels, as this passage from the "Syrian Supreme Judiciary Council" (an ISIS front group) indicates:

> We indicate that giving any kind of support to the United States, Western countries, and their allies in the region against a fighting Muslim group in the region is apostasy against the religion of God (Islam) and definite infidelity, *and the individual who does so is no more Muslim.*[29]

An ISIS video denounced Bahraini monarch Hamid ibn Issa and his prime minister as an infidel because, among other reasons, "…they befriend the already infidels and apostates" (presumably the Americans and the Bahraini Shi'a).[30] Another statement from ISIS member Abu Mohammad al-Adnani denounces all Muslims who do not support ISIS: "By God, we cannot find for you a religious reason to lag behind in supporting this state. Today, fie on *Rawafid* (Shi'ites), Sahawat (Awakening movement) and apostates."[31] Another ISIS leader declared that even other *jihadi* groups like the Palestinian Hamas should be beheaded for signing a cease-fire with Israel.[32]

Takfir doctrine as practiced by ISIS is so extreme that even some al-Qaeda theorists have questioned its legitimacy (Mustafa al-Yazid, one of al-Qaeda's founders, for example, Attiyah Allahal-Libi, and Abu Muhammad al-Maqdisi), though other Al-Qaeda members (specifically the late Yemeni organizer Anwar Awlaki) have endorsed it. The danger of the concept for some Islamists is it can be used to settle personal

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26   Cook, 139.

27   "Tunisia's New Constitution Criminalizes 'Taqfir,'" *Al-Hayat*, February 3, 2014.

28   *The Amman Message* (Jordan: The Royal Al-Bayt Institute for Islamic Thought, 2009), 17.

29   "Syria: Supreme Judiciary Council Prohibits Supporting 'Crusade Campaign' Against Muslim Groups," Statement attributed to the Supreme Judiciary Council of the Courthouse in the Levant, September 14, 2014. Emphasis added. The full text is: "God says: 'O ye who believe! Take not the Jews and the Christians for your friends and protectors: They are but friends and protectors to each other. And he amongst you that turns to them (for friendship) is of them. Verily Allah guideth not a people unjust,' (Koranic verse, *Al-Ma'idah*, 5:51).

30   "Video Shows 4 ISIL-Affiliated Bahraini Militants addressing 'Sunni People of Bahrain,'" September 27, 2014.

31   "ISIS Declaration of War Against Al-Qaeda," *Asharq al-Awsat*, July 1, 2014. The "*Sahawat*" (or "*Sawa*") movements can refer to the "Awakening" movement in Iraq in Anbar Province, but it can also refer to more "moderate" Islamist movement like Egypt's Muslim Brotherhood or the "Sahwa" movement in Saudi Arabia.

32   David D. Kirkpatrick, "ISIS' Harsh Brand of Islam is Rooted in Austere Saudi Creed," *New York Times*, September 24, 2014.

scores, and its impudent application may violate even radical under-standings of *Shari'a* (Islamic law).[33]

Jahiliyya

Jahiliyya is the feared state of barbarism and ignorance that Ibn Taymiyya warned about centuries ago, arguing the Muslim *umma* (community of Muslim believers) must be ever-vigilant, or it will return to those times. The term *jahiliyya* appears in the Qur'an and in the Prophet's *hadith*, though Sayyid Qutb put a particular dramatic emphasis on it. For Qutb, *jahili* societies are where the strong oppress the weak, materialism reigns over spiritualism, and decadent behavior rules because people have rejected the *Shari'a*.[34] As non-believers are the chief source of *jahiliyya*, for Qutb, they must be placed in a *dhimmi* (protected) status that declared them both "protected" but also inferior to Muslims; a status that most Muslim countries eliminated years ago.[35] Moreover, Qutb emphasized modern *jahiliyya*, as opposed to traditional *jahiliyya*, can appear "Muslim," but a society is ruled by *people* instead of *God*, even if they profess to be Muslims, is in *jahiliyya*.[36] Yet what is critical is even Qutb does not label these "so-called Muslims" as *kufr*, or "unbelievers."[37] This is important, because neither the Qur'an nor the hadith containing *jahiliyya* refer to those in its state as *kufr*, which is consistent with Qutb, the most radical interpreter of the concept. Yet ISIS consistently refers to the *kufr* as worthy only of death, a sentence that not only violates the Qur'an (the most authentic source of Islam) but also the hadith of the Prophet and influential *jihadi* writers like Sayyid Qutb.

The Caliphate Movement

Caliphate comes from the Arabic term for successor (*khalifa*), meaning those who assume the role that Muhammad did as a political leader (but *not* as a *messenger* of God, as Islam holds that Muhammad was the last messenger). The Islamic legitimacy of the caliph ideation itself is controversial; its Qur'anic basis is questionable, and the very notion would seem to contradict the belief that Islam is a religion between believer and God, not a sanction for religious governance.[38] Most Sunni Muslims argue that the first three successors to the Prophet, his father-in-law, Abdullah ibn Abi Qahafa (known as Abu Bakr), 'Umar ibn al-Khattab, and 'Uthman ibn 'Affan were legitimate successors, or "rightly guided" (*Rashidun*) and some would attribute the same status to the fourth caliph, Ali ibn Abi Talib, though many Sunni do not accept Ali's *Rashidun* standing. For the Shi'a, though, Ali is the only authentic caliph, as they argue that unjust companions blocked his rightful accession as Muhammad's successor.

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33 Jerry Mark Long and Alex S. Wilner, "Delegitimizing al-Qaeda: Defeating an Army 'Whose Men Love Death,'" *International Security*, 39 (2014): 158-159.

34 Calvert, 218; William E. Shepard, "Sayyid Qutb's Doctrine of Jahiliyya," *International Journal of Middle East Studies*, 35 (2003): 524.

35 For the suspension of *dhimmi* status in Egypt, see Rachel M. Scott, *The Challenge of Political Islam: Non-Muslims and the Egyptian State* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2010), Ch. 4.

36 Shepard, 528.

37 Ibid. 529; Calvert, 220, 235.

38 AbuKhalil, 683-684; Mohammed Ayoob, *The Many Faces of Political Islam* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2008), 10-12.

Following the *Rashidun* Caliphate, a plethora of caliphates emerged in varying parts of the Muslim world, some were Sunni, Shi'a, Arab, and Turkish, but most, following the Umayyad Caliphate, had *political* leaders rather than *prophetic* governance.[39] The last caliphate, the Ottoman Empire, ended in 1924 with the establishment of the Turkish Republic.[40] After that time, the caliphate ideal waned, replaced in the Arab world by Arab nationalism as a response to Western colonialism, with only a few fringe groups (*Hisbat al-Tahrir* for example, in Central Asia and London) calling for its restoration. *Al Qaeda* called for a caliphate, but its leaders never proclaimed one. In 2014, Ibrahim al-Badri, taking the *nome de guerre* "Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi," declared the presence of the "Islamic State," as a caliphate initially encompassing the territory that ISIS seized in northern Iraq and southeast Syria, whose defining point is the Euphrates River.[41] While some concluded that the aspirations of ISIS were largely the Sunni areas of Syria and Iraq, its forces pushed over the Lebanese border, close to Israeli-occupied Golan, near the Jordan-Iraq border, and very close to the Turkish border, as of September 2014. Its territorial aspirations appeared to be defined more by its capacity to push away from its core areas than by some preconceived plan.

In the announcement of the ISIS "Caliphate," Ibrahim al-Badri, the self-proclaimed Caliph Ibrahim promised a caliph would protect against *jahiliyya*:

> Without this condition (the caliphate) being met, authority becomes nothing more than kingship, dominance and rule, accompanied with destruction, corruption, oppression, subjugation, fear, and the decadence of the human being and his descent to the level of animals.[42]

The claim that a caliphate is preferable to *jahiliyya* is curious, however; violence, treachery, assassination, and disorder characterized most caliphates, including the *Rashidun*—three of the first four caliphs were murdered and constant war took place during their reigns.[43] Those following the first four quickly became imperial dynasties, with conquests for wealth and power dominating their narratives.[44] They were hereditary monarchies, increasingly bereft of Islamic guidance; the great fourteenth century scholar Ibn Khaldun notes the decline, "…from Mu'awiyah (the first Umayyad caliph) on, the group feeling (of the Arabs) approached its final goal, royal authority. The restraining influence of religion had weakened."[45]

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39   The Umayyad Caliphate claimed its legitimacy from their claim as the family of Uthman, the third Caliph. Patricia Crone, *God's Rule: Six Centuries of Medieval Islamic Political Thought* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004), 34. As Crone notes, however, the Umayyids violated the essence of the caliphate through dynastic succession rather than election.

40   Not all Muslims agreed that the Ottoman Empire was really a caliphate, citing the lack of prophetic mandate for Ottoman sultans.

41   Interestingly, al-Badri took the name of the first Caliph as his surname.

42   "ISIS Spokesman Declares Caliphate; Rebrands Group as "Islamic State," *SITE Monitoring Service*, June 29, 2014, https://news.siteintelgroup.com/Jihadist-News/isis-spokesman-declares-caliphate-rebrands-group-as-islamic-state.html.

43   Fred M Donner, *Muhammad and the Believers at the Origins of Islam* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2010).

44   Efraim Karsh, *Islamic Imperialism: A History* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2006); Patricia Crone, *God's Rule: Government and Islam: Six Centuries of Medieval Islamic Political Thought*, 17-219

45   Ibn Khaldun, *The Muqaddimah: An Introduction to History* (translated and introduced by Franz Rosenthal) (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2005), 168.

The legitimacy of self-declared caliphate of ISIS is dubious at best in historical Islamic thought. One of the guiding principles under *tawhid* is *hakimiyyah*, a term meaning all sovereignty belongs solely to God. For theorists like Sayyid Qutb, this means there is a difference between *authority* and *enforcing* authority, because while authority is gained by the recognition of *hakimiyyah*, enforcing authority can only be done with the consensus of the Muslim community.[46] Notes Hasan al-Turabi, "… an Islamic state is not primordial; the primary institution is the *umma* (the Muslim community). The phrase 'Islamic state' itself is a misnomer. The state is only the political dimension of the collective endeavor of Muslims."[47] Ibn Taymiyya did not rule out the permissibility of a caliphate, as his detractors argue, but he does argue that it must mirror the guidance of the Prophet and the *Rashidun,* the latter whom were chosen by consensus rather than by self-proclamation.[48]

In short, for these theorists, only the umma can create and sanctify a caliphate, and thus the Islamic State is no more a caliphate than for example, the self-proclaimed Ismaili Shi'a "Fatimid Caliphate," with its own dubious Islamic legitimacy, even among the Shi'a.[49] Moreover, ISIS' claimed desire of unifying Muslims under its "caliphate" also lacks historical exactitude. Caliphates gave the illusion of unity under the Islamic tent, but such unity was largely imaginary. Observed Afzal Ashraf:

> The Ottoman caliphate coincided with the Safavid caliphate and the Mughal Empire, which occasionally claimed a caliphate. The Ottomans and the Safavids even went to war with each other. So, the idea of Islamic unity under a political caliphate, rather than a prophetic one, has no basis in history. Until Muslim scholars make that point clear, the uneducated will continue to be radicalised by false political notions.[50]

The Islamic State is in reality a rent-seeking criminal enterprise, similar to some of the corrupted caliphates that followed the *Rashidun*. The Islamic state took territory containing exploitable petroleum reserves, and banks, from which its forces stole the equivalent of hundreds of millions of US dollar equivalents to finance its operations. It governs not through Islam, but through a reign of terror, with executions, torture, and rape as the cost of not abiding by IS's corrupt vision of "Islam," in clear violation of Islamic law: "Women and children may be taken into captivity, but jurists are in universal agreement that no

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46   Sayed Khatib, "Hakimiyyah and Jahiliyyah in the Thought of Sayyid Qutb," *Middle Eastern Studies*, 38, no. 3 (July 2002): 155-156. For Muhammad Qutb's approach to Hakimiyyah, see Stéphane Lacroix, *Awakening Islam: The Politics of Religious Dissent in Contemporary Saudi Arabia* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2011), 54-55.

47   Hasan al-Turabi, "The Islamic State," in Roxanne L. Eubin and Muhammad Qasim Zaman, *Princeton Readings in Islamist Thought: Texts from al-Banna to Bin Laden* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2009), 214-215.

48   Mona Hassan, "Modern Interpretations and Misrepresentations of a Medieval Scholar: Apprehending the Political Thought of Ibn Taymiyya," in Yossef Rapoport and Shahab Amhed, (eds.), *Ibn Taymiyya and this Times* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 343-346.

49   The Fatimid "Caliphate," an Ismaili Shi'a polity, originated in what is now Tunisia and later migrated to Cairo in 909, and lasted until 1171, when the Kurdish Sunni leader Salal ad-Din conquered it. It was probably more of a dynasty than a true caliphate, though its leaders took the title caliph. Halm, 160-163; Momen, 55; Hamid Dabashi, *Shi'ism: A Religion of Protest* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2011), 121-131 on Khwajah Nizam al-Mulk, an influential Ismaili theologian.

50   Afzal Ashraf, "The Myth of the Caliphate and the Islamic State," *Al Jazeera*, July 10, 2014.

hard should befall them at the hands of Muslims. Furthermore, it is not permitted to torture or mutilate adult male prisoners…"[51]

Conclusions and Policy Implications

While much of the world, including much of the Islamic world, is horrified by ISIS actions, too many young and disposed persons find ISIS actions attractive or justifiable—one American beheading was defended by a potential recruit's father: "He was an agent and deserved to die."[52] ISIS media campaigns that call followers to jihad in "defense of Islam" must be opposed with a counter-media operation that uses Islam to defeat ISIS propaganda. Opposition must work to convince both active members and possible recruits that joining and serving ISIS will not lead to the pleasures of Paradise, but rather a fiery eternity.

Covert Information Operations?

The United States faces significant obstacles in launching a counter-ISIS information campaign, as they lack credibility in the minds of most Muslims.[53] Yet if the United States can wage covert military operations, it can also wage covert information operations. The United States has the technology, intelligence, and media experience to identify pertinent communities, craft messages, and to deliver them. Anti-ISIS messages do not need American ownership; for example, the US-developed counter-al-Qaeda information campaign featured a reduced American role, with more Muslims joining the narrative, and enjoyed some success.[54] Messages may be sent to comics in Baghdad, film makers in Sudan, newspaper writers in Cairo, for examples. It can accelerate ISIS opposition already growing in European Muslim communities.[55] Counter-ISIS communications can be woven into internet sites used by ISIS itself or its adherents. Care should be taken to employ terms that most Muslims understand, but add sophistication in place of the simple arguments that "Islam forbids this."

The campaign should be designed to evoke *dialog* over *monologue* by encouraging Muslims to discuss and implement religious prohibitions on ISIS ideation.[56] They must employ the very messages of those Islamic thinkers admired by *jihadi* to counter IS messaging (the unsophisticated messages in IS videos reveal how little ISIS "messengers" really understand about Islam). Ibn Taymiyya's regarding *takfir* as impermissible carries more weight with Muslims than the simple "Islam forbids

51   Wael B. Hallaq, *Sharia: Theory, Practice, Transformations* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 330.

52   Ceylan Yeginsu, "ISIS Draws a Steady Stream of Recruits from Turkey," *New York Times*, September 15, 2014. The same story reported some recruits successfully fled ISIS after they discovered the true nature of their deeds (one member had to bury a victim alive to be accepted as an ISIS member), yet recruiting remained strong after the beheading videos in particular went global. It is also the case that ISIS pays recruits and offers them amenities, but it still draws upon its "Islamic" claims to attract them initially.

53   Ronald R. Krebs, "Rethinking the Battle of Ideas: How the United States can Help Muslim Moderates," *Orbis* 52 (2008): 339; Marc Lynch, *Voices of the New Arab Public* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2006), 153-184.

54   Kristin M. Lord and Marc Lynch, *America's Extended Hand: Assessing the Obama Administration's Global Engagement Strategy* (Washington, DC: Center for New American Security, June 2010), 23.

55   Dan Bilefsky, "In New Front Against Islamic State, Dictionary Becomes a Weapon," *New York Times*, October 2, 2014.

56   Peter Krause and Stephen Van Evera, "Public Diplomacy: Ideas for the War of Ideas," *Middle East Policy* 16, no. 9 (Fall 2009): 106.

takfir." Imagine, for example, a video clip of an Islamic religious scholar explaining to potential ISIS recruits Quranic passages that clearly forbid killing for violating *tawhid*, or that caliphates are not legitimate unless their origin is the *umma* itself. Qur'an readings and teachings are common television fare in Muslim countries, and narrators might be willing to critique ISIS theology, if only to prevent a fiery end to potential ISIS recruits, or prevent other Muslims from dying at the hands of ISIS. Islamic-style rock and roll is another venue for an information campaign, as lyrics lampooning ISIS might have an effect on those who find Qur'anic readings uninspiring.

Education on Islam is also important, as many ISIS recruits come from impoverished backgrounds and have little formal knowledge of religion.[57] A Moroccan news outlet noted some Moroccan ISIS recruits, "Most of them were peddlers, and their education level is elementary at best. Moreover, they have a superficial knowledge of religion and difficulties in integrating their social environment."[58] Noted another analyst about ISIS recruits, "The vast majority of Westerners joining up with ISIS are extraordinarily ignorant when it comes to religion."[59] ISIS recruiting techniques focus on simplified Islam, or on ideation that attracts the dispossessed, and provides only glib references to Islam: "Muslims are being attacked…," or "jihad is obligatory for Muslims," for example, to hook vulnerable members. If ISIS recruits and members understood more about the very religion they claim to fight for, they would be able to resist the appeals of defending it, and the special appeal of martyrdom. ISIS practices apostasy daily, and its "caliphate" has no meaning for the vast majority of Muslims.

What is needed is an education campaign focusing on how a better understanding of traditional Islam can shatter the ISIS propaganda and convince both active and potential members ISIS is acting on its corrupted "Islamic" beliefs which will not result in rewards in Paradise, but rather a much more unpleasant fate. As the Qur'an holds, "Had we but listened or used our intelligence, we would not have been among the dwellers of the blazing Fire!"[60]

Robert S. McNamara once stated that the United States was at war with the Vietnamese birth rate as he tried to explain why killing communist troops was failing to win the war. The United States faces a similar problem; the flow of new recruits is far greater than is the ability to kill or wound them. ISIS stole most of its infrastructure and weapons, so bombing what they have only motives them to steal more.

In short, the limits placed on US military will not allow for anything resembling a military victory, thus it is imperative that all the other instruments of influence be applied to defeating ISIS. If even a few potential recruits and active members can be persuaded they will not

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57   ISIS spokesman Abu Muhammad al-Adnani, according to a report, announced, "Congratulations on this clear victory, congratulations on this great triumph … Today the nations of *kufr* [sic: *kuffar*] (unbelievers) in the West are terrified,' al-Adnani said in a 34-minute speech, where he mistakenly referred to the plural of "kafir" or "kuffar" as the word for "disbelief" (*kufr*), highlighting his shallow understanding of not only Islam, but even his native language." *Counter-Current News*, July 2, 2014, http://countercurrentnews.com/2014/07/isis-changes-name-declares-new-caliph/.

58   "Fifty youths from Meknes joined ISIL ranks." *Al-Ahdath al-Maghribiyah*, September 24, 2014.

59   "ISIS Recruiting Westerners: How The 'Islamic State' Goes After Non-Muslims And Recent Converts In The West," *International Business Times*, September 8, 2014.

60   Quran 67:8-10.

obtain ISIS's promised heavenly rewards, the counter-ISIS information campaign will have succeeded.