FEAR AND FAITH:
THE STRENGTHS, WEAKNESSES AND DELUSIONS OF ISIS

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The claim made by ISIS (Islamic State of Iraq and Syria) media that the "lone wolf" attack in Nice was carried out by "a soldier of the Islamic state", reveals just how this organization sustains its most remarkable achievement: painting itself as victorious while losing territories in the Middle East. Evidence that this deceit has left its mark on Western thinking is the title "Islamic State is winning, America must soon use its one remaining option", posted in August 2015 by ex-CIA intelligence officer Michael Scheuer, who called for a US reckoning over its misguided policy concerning ISIS. Scheuer, who led the investigation team that monitored Bin Laden, wrote: "The only effective U.S.-NATO defense against the Islamists is to stop all intervention and let the Sunnis, Shias, and Israelis settle their differences in whatever merrily murderous manner pleases them." The questionable choice to tie Israel to the Sunni-Shi'ite death orgy aside, Scheuer's basic assumption highlights a common misconception: ISIS is winning and the US can do nothing about it.

The post, which ISIS republished that month in its English-language mouthpiece (Dabiq 11:56), attests to the Islamic State's extraordinary ability to mislead both friends and enemies. For three years, ISIS has built up an image of strength far greater than its actual power. While it had hoped to conquer vast areas and establish a new caliphate, in early 2014 it was ousted from several areas by local Syrian militias, and in 2015 lost battles in Ramadi, Tikrit, Sinjar, and Kubani. Recently the organization shrank further after losing Palmyra in

Syria and Fallujah in Iraq. If counter-terrorism specialists such as Scheuer still think ISIS is "winning" after such stinging defeats, we are truly dealing with a master of illusion.

The chimera of might that ISIS has crafted relies on our psychological tendency to confound fear with power. ISIS has horrified the world with its image of pure evil, cultivated through unfathomable acts of cruelty and decimation of cultural relics. For many, this dread translates into an assumption of strength that vastly surpasses the organization's actual military ability. The implications are massive: adversaries sometimes avoid or minimize confrontation with ISIS; people living in areas captured by members of the organization do its bidding; and pundits such as Scheuer, along with certain politicians have convinced audiences that ISIS is winning. Worst of all, new recruits join ISIS out of fascination with its sway over the global agenda.

However, fear is not the main reason why many individuals find their way to ISIS. Rather, they are lured by a movement that instills hope in the hearts of furious, desperate Muslims that they can change the miserable world in which they live. ISIS proclaims its intention to realize the longstanding revolutionary desire to sweep away the perversions of the old world and, specifically to their case, introduce the ancient, just world of the Prophet Muhammad.

This revolutionary plan relies on a potent combination of fear and faith. Members of ISIS are convinced that using mass murder to spread fear is justified so long as it helps promote the movement's religious vision. Let us pause to recall that combining fear and faith for political goals is not unique. The West has its own list of disreputable ideological movements that resorted to mass killings in the name of making the world a better place: French revolutionaries rolled heads in the name of fraternity, liberty, and equality in the 18th century; Stalin's henchmen executed millions to glorify the Communist ideal; and the Nazis murdered Jews, homosexuals, and handicapped persons to ensure racial purity. Yet ISIS stands apart of other 20th- and 21st-century movements in that it is the only one that openly flaunts its carnage.

The vision that ISIS promotes is based on apocalyptic notions from the fringes of Islamic religious and intellectual tradition. Apocalypse offers comfort

because it inverts the power relations between "true" Muslim societies and the rest of the world. The belief that their tiny, divinely-chosen group of "true" Muslims shall inherit the earth empowers the embattled members of ISIS. However, this idiosyncratic vision is also detrimental to the organization, detached from reality as it is, leading ISIS to make decisions that are against its own interests. Like many delusions of grandeur, the way ISIS sees itself is at once a source of strength and enfeeblement.

Failure and delusions of grandeur

The ability of the Islamic State to rattle its opponents is evident, for example, in a TIME magazine interview with Michael Morell, former Acting Director and Deputy Director of the CIA, that ISIS also chose to republish. In the interview, Morell states that "ISIS poses a major threat to the US and to US interests abroad and that threat is growing every day." He lists successful attacks and emphasizes ISIS' ability to take over many parts of the world. Unfortunately, he overlooks the organization's failures. Gauging ISIS' ability solely on the basis of its successes is a questionable choice, since assessing an adversary requires looking at the full picture: strengths, achievements, weaknesses and failures.

Despite the ominous picture painted by numerous experts and politicians, Sunni terror organizations actually have a dismal track record. For fifty years, they have repeatedly tried and failed to overthrow regimes in various Muslim countries. As far back as the 1970s and 1980s, organizations such as *al-Takfir wa-al-Hijrah* (Excommunication and Migration) in Egypt and the Muslim Brotherhood in Syria tried to act against their respective governments and were eliminated. In the following decades, several Middle Eastern rulers were overthrown, but these groups had little – if any – impact on the events leading up to the regime change. For example, in the late 1970s, the Afghan Communist Party took over Afghanistan with the aid of Soviet forces. Only later did Islamist forces enter Afghanistan's political arena, fighting the Soviets with US and Pakistani backing. In the 21st century, popular uprisings rocked the regimes in Tunisia, Libya, Egypt, and Syria, and despite the impression ISIS would like to create, neither it nor other militant Islamist movements were involved in the initial stages of these uprisings.

Even in Iraq, birthplace of ISIS, it was the US and not militant Islamists that toppled Saddam Hussein. Only after the Americans destroyed Saddam's institutions of government in 2003 did militants start trickling into the crumbling state. Meanwhile, ISIS' military accomplishments in Iraq were few and far between. For some eight years, from 2003 to 2011, while the US dismantled the Ba'ath party, Abu Mus`ab al-Zarqawi, the reputed founder of ISIS, and his men infiltrated the country and did their best to prevent its rehabilitation. They hoped to induce chaos, which could then be used to establish a Muslim state. However, despite the heavy losses that American forces and the Iraqi population suffered, ISIS failed to overthrow the government and create the political vacuum that would serve as a springboard for building the Caliphate. On the contrary: from 2006 to 2010, when the US clamped down on al-Zarqawi's followers, ISIS lost military capacity and initiated fewer terror attacks.

The failure in Iraq was repeated wherever al-Qaeda and ISIS turned. In the Arabian Peninsula, and especially in Yemen, al-Qaeda carried out dozens of attacks yet, just like in Iraq, the high number of civilian casualties did not shake the regime. Where al-Qaeda failed, however, the Yemeni people succeeded: a popular uprising led to the resignation of President Ali Abdullah Saleh in January 2011. This destabilization spurred al-Qaeda to try and establish Islamic states in several parts of Yemen, but tension between local rulers and tribes, along with Yemeni military action, foiled the move. Similar attempts to establish Islamic states in North Africa and in Somalia failed due to friction with the local population or to military intervention.

It appears, therefore, that despite their capacity to carry out painful attacks in the West, in the Middle East ISIS and al-Qaeda were "serial losers". They recovered only in 2011, when the masses filled the streets and toppled dictators. What militant Islamist movements had failed to achieve in decades of bloody struggles, angry citizens accomplished within weeks.

So what can ISIS actually do? It can enter areas where central governments have collapsed and take control of fragmented local populations that are at war with each other. In both Iraq and Syria, ISIS was too weak to overthrow the

regime, but was shrewd enough to exploit the lack of strong government, social fragmentation, and frustration of oppressed groups. Having penetrated regions with a power vacuum, ISIS cemented its control with psychological means – primarily by terrorizing the population. However, its brutal approach to the inhabitants of newly conquered regions may achieve certain goals in the short term, but has made it difficult for ISIS to retain control over time.

Fear

The psychological warfare that ISIS uses has substantive results. Opponents are thrown off course, occupied residents lose their ability to resist, and state institutions come to a standstill. This mode of operation was articulated and promoted by several militant leaders and thinkers, including Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, who "strived to create as much chaos as possible with the means […] that focus on causing the enemy death, injury, and damage. With chaos, he intended to prevent any [enemy] regime from ever achieving a degree of stability" (Dabiq 1:36). Destabilizing regimes until they topple is the first stage of al-Zarqawi's chaos strategy; the second is inserting Islamist forces into the newly-created political vacuum and establishing an Islamic state. Like many revolutionaries, al-Zarqawi believed that the old world had to be destroyed to make way for the new.

Like justice, terrorism must be seen to be done. That is why al-Zarqawi and his men amplified their actions by documenting and broadcasting them. Their macabre performances – decapitations, mass executions, the Jordanian pilot burned alive – were filmed and published by media around the world. The goal of these snuff movies is to warn Western leaders against considering military intervention in ISIS-controlled areas and to deter Iraqi youngsters from joining the security forces gaining power under American supervision. They also serve to recruit Muslims craving power and a confrontation with the West.

The strengths and weaknesses of the chaos strategy, and its dependence on political terrorism, came to light when ISIS entered Syria. There, al-Zarqawi's doctrine was applied by Haji Bakr, an intelligence officer under Saddam

Hussein who had joined radical Islamists after the US expelled Ba`ath Party members from the army. In 2012, Haji Bakr left for Syria in order to tilt the power vacuum created there in favor of ISIS. To do so, he used two methods: gathering intelligence and terrorizing residents.

Intelligence was obtained by pitting locals against each other. Like many secret services, especially in Eastern Europe, Hajji Bakr's men established spy networks that drove locals to report on their neighbors. Spies were recruited with the usual means: ideological affiliation, revenge against institutions, family feuds, communal conflicts, lust for money, and a yen for adventure. Very quickly, every community had a network of spies reporting on organizations and militias operating in the area, on rich families that could be extorted, and on people suspected of criminal offenses ranging from theft to vice.

Many accounts of ISIS' repression of Syrians have been reported by local opposition groups. For example, Mujahed a-Shami, director of the 'Deir e-Zor is Being Slaughtered Silently' campaign, related that ISIS monitors anyone who refuses to surrender information to the courts. According to a-Shami, "the Islamic State plants security officers wearing normal civilian clothing, and working undercover, between residents. These officers are local IS recruits only, from the city itself. This practice allows IS to know everything within minutes." It appears that ISIS does not need to employ large military forces in areas under its control, as the residents police themselves.

The local agents described by a-Shami supply ISIS with the information it needs to abduct and execute potential opponents from the local leadership. In May 2013, for instance, ISIS began a wave of abductions and killings that spread through the city of Raqqa. This continued with no resistance for months, during which time many local leaders and heads of tribes swore allegiance to ISIS.

Along with blatant use of violence, ISIS intimidates the inhabitants of areas under its control with supposedly legitimate means such as strict interpretations of Shari`a law. One particularly jarring measure is the use of hudud – a Quranic form of corporal punishment that includes cutting off the hands of thieves, crucifying highway robbers, and stoning adulterers. ISIS also prohibits smoking, has made prayer at mosques compulsory, and applies the Islamic moral code

to the public domain (for instance, forbidding men and women who are not related to be seen together in public). Application of Shari`a law and the moral purification of society have become an invasive show of force that allows ISIS to monitor and control entire communities.

However, the mistreatment of local populations has had a boomerang effect by generating violent opposition to ISIS. This peaked in January 2014 after ISIS went on a killing spree, galvanizing several militias in northern Syrian including the Army of Mujahideen, the Free Syrian Army, and the Syrian Islamic Front into joint action against the organization. This combined force managed to drive ISIS out of many villages in the areas of Aleppo and Idlib, and even out of Raqqa. Although backup forces enabled ISIS to regain control of the city of Raqqa, it lost the adjoining areas.

Another failure of ISIS is massive emigration from areas under its control. This desertion is a blow to the organization's image, since it is purportedly establishing a true Islamic state that should be drawing in droves of believers, not chasing them away. To make matters worse, residents who remain in these areas have formed groups that risk their lives to serve as local informants for the West. Demonstrations against ISIS have recently been held in several cities.

In addition to resistance put up by the Syrian populace, ISIS also faces fundamental criticism from al-Qaeda leaders. More than ten years ago, when al-Zarqawi and his men began their terrifying acts of slaughter, they were criticized by mainstream Muslims, religious Muslim leaders, and even by murderous groups like al-Qaeda. In 2005, Ayman al-Zawahiri – then second-in-command of al-Qaeda and now leader of the organization since Bin Laden's assassination – sent al-Zarqawi a letter demanding that he end the bloodthirsty violence, as it was alienating the masses whose support is crucial to the battle against non-believers. Al-Zawahiri claimed that while terrorizing its enemies, ISIS was also distancing potential supporters: "Among the things which the feelings of the Muslim populace who love and support you will never find palatable – also – are the scenes of slaughtering the hostages." But the leaders of ISIS did not take the criticism to heart. They looked down on the feebleness of their former al-Qaeda commanders and even chose to publicly embarrass them:

in an article published in Dabiq, an ISIS fighter called al-Zawahiri "senile and deviant" (Dabiq 12:55).

The fundamental disagreement between al-Qaeda and ISIS concerns the role of public opinion in the battle to purify Islam, since militant Islam has failed to win over the hearts of the Muslim public. According to PEW research, less than 15% of citizens in all Muslim states support ISIS; in many of these countries, support falls below 10%. ISIS' lack of popularity in Muslim countries is compounded by another figure: from 2013 to 2015, some 30,000 people joined Jihadist movements – a miniscule percent of the world's 1.7 billion Muslims. This is a far cry from what ISIS and al-Qaeda need in order to fulfill their dreams of world domination.

The overwhelmingly negative view of Muslims regarding both movements was openly addressed in the correspondence between al-Zawahiri and al-Zarqawi. Yet although both al-Qaeda and ISIS acknowledged failure, their responses were different and even contradictory. Al-Qaeda chose to change approach and try to court the public, while ISIS has adhered to its vision of total justice, which requires ignoring the will of the masses and even taking control of them, with fear tactics if need be.

This rare agreement between al-Zawahiri, al-Zarqawi, and Western researchers of Islam, all of whom recognize that militant Islam has monumentally failed to gain public traction, could have quelled the rising Islamophobia in the West. Where ISIS has failed, more moderate Islamist movements such as the Muslim Brotherhood and Hamas are drawing much larger numbers of supporters. Yet the drama-loving media and politicians who capitalize on public fear of Muslims and Arabs ignore this information, probably because they have little interest in putting the picture of militant Islam in true perspective. For example, in Benjamin Netanyahu's address to the 2014 UN General Assembly, the Israeli prime minister continued with his line of fear tactics: "ISIS and Hamas are branches of the same poisonous tree. ISIS and Hamas share a fanatical creed, which they both seek to impose well beyond the territory under their control." However, Netanyahu is simply wrong – ISIS and Hamas do not share the same creed; in fact, they are fighting each other in the Gaza strip.

ISIS' double failure, both on the battlefield and in public opinion, begs several questions: who are those 30,000 new recruits who came to Syria and Iraq from more than 100 countries between 2013 and 2015? What ideology led them there? And how does ISIS exploit their emigration to turn them into culture heroes?

Culture heroes

ISIS mouthpiece Dabiq runs a regular column titled "Among the Believers Are Men" devoted to lauding members who were killed: a member of the organization's *da'wah* (propaganda units) who used to volunteer for guard duty at night; a combatant who fought in several battles; and the infamous executioner, Jihadi John. All these men are presented as role models for the ISIS members they left behind. Like stories of culture heroes around the world, these columns are filled with details that illustrate ISIS' values, and particularly that of absolute devotion: being prepared to give your life for the divine goal of purifying and spreading the word of Islam. For example, a short biographic piece on Abu Ja`far al-Almani ("the German") sports a picture of a smiling young man in a T-shirt looking like any traveling student on a gap year (Dabiq 11:38). He is depicted as a generous, popular, kind and gentle man who managed to maintain his faith despite growing up in an immoral environment in Germany. Abu Ja`far could easily have integrated into German society – he studied engineering and would probably have developed a comfortable career in the West. But after seeing Assad's Alawite soldiers abuse Sunnis, he decided to leave Germany to fight for the Islamic Caliphate. In Syria, he joined a unit of German Muslim fighters and proved his worth in several battles, in the last of which he was killed. Here, as in other biographies published in the column, the human, moral and normative sides of the dead man's personality are emphasized – he kept away from moral degeneration and his superior values even caused him immense suffering when he saw the injustice caused to innocent Muslims. This led him to sever his ties with the West and join the Islamic Caliphate.

Another article relates the life and death of Abu Shurayh a-Silani, a Sri Lankan who was killed in a shelling of Raqqa. Again, the portrayal emphasizes his

humanity – apparently the devout militant had a great sense of humor, was an erudite man and avid reader who spoke several languages, preached against immoral conduct, and often talked with his friends about *hijrah* (emigration), *jihad* (holy war) and the war at the end of days (Dabiq 12:57). He was older than Abu Ja`far al-Almani and already had a family and a secure job. For religious reasons, he immigrated to an ISIS-held area, bringing sixteen people with him – including his parents, wife, and six children.

Muhammad Emzawi, who came to be known as 'Jihadi John', became a vehemently despised figure in the West after footage of him beheading prisoners was broadcast around the world. Born to a Kuwaiti family that immigrated to London, and much like Abu Ja`far, Emzawi grew up in a poor neighborhood and was exposed to immoral life-styles, yet was saved from moral degeneration by his staunch faith (Dabiq 13:22-23). In 2005 he began to serve Jihadi causes and came under the surveillance of British intelligence service MI5. However, he managed to evade their grasp and reach the battlefield. The column refers to the beheadings in passing, mentioning only that Emzawi's harshness towards non-believers "enraged all the nations". An entire paragraph is devoted to lesser known sides of Emzawi's personality, such as his "mercy, kindness, and generosity towards believers". Apparently, he was especially known for his affection for orphaned children of ISIS members who died in battle: he would frequently take one to the park or zoo, and taught others Quran. In 2015 he was killed in a drone attack near Raqqa.

The way ISIS chooses to portray these fighters in its journal reveals the heroic ethos it is trying to cultivate. These men are strong-willed: many grew up in poor neighborhoods in Western countries and were exposed to depravity, yet saved themselves from corruption. Also, they are aware of what is going on in the world and identify with their Muslim brothers suffering abuse and mass murder in Syria, Yemen, Afghanistan, and Gaza. Finally, they took the ultimate step encouraged by ISIS and immigrated to the area of the Islamic Caliphate. Immigration plays a central role in Muslim and Jewish sacred memory. That was the case with Muhammad and his followers who immigrated from Mecca to Medina (known as the *Hijrah*), and similarly, the case of Abraham, who immigrated from Ur of the Chaldees to Canaan. In its description of these

three recruits, ISIS emphasizes that their choice to immigrate raised them to the highest spiritual and religious level possible.

Portraying a man who beheaded captives as merciful is galling to any non-supporter of ISIS. But if we want to go beyond aversion and understand what lies behind the ethos that ISIS is constructing, as well as comprehend how it affects Muslim youth, we must examine this ideology, which has turned the values of Islam upside down and presents terrorists as freedom fighters.

Faith and feeling

Getting people to enlist for a violent ideological struggle that includes mass murder and abuse is nothing new or rare. In *Reflections of Nazism: An Essay on Kitsch and Death*, researcher Saul Friedlander probes the motivations of average citizens to join one of the most horrendous extermination machines in history and concludes: "Nazism's attraction lay less in any explicit ideology than in the power of emotions, images, and phantasms."[1] ISIS, too, speaks to emotional problems. Like Nazism, it attracts people who have experienced humiliation as part of a group, nation, or faith and are drawn to a megalomaniac vision in which the oppressed rise up and take over the world as the new moral elite.

The trampling of Muslim honor is a major element in the identity of ISIS members and leaders, who often declare that Muslims must take control of their destiny in order to recover their lost dignity. For example, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi declared that soon, "a day will come when the Muslim will walk everywhere as a master, having honor, being revered…" (Dabiq 1:8). According to Abu Muhammad al-'Adnani, senior spokesperson for ISIS, many generations of Muslims have suffered "disgrace, being nursed on the milk of humiliation, and being ruled by the vilest of all people"; it is now time to "shake off the dust of humiliation and disgrace, for the era of lamenting and moaning has gone, and the dawn of honor has emerged anew" (Dabiq 1:8). According to this narrative, Muslim honor will be restored once ISIS purges Islam of its

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1 Friedlander, S. *Reflections of Nazism: An Essay on Kitsch and Death*. (Indiana University Press, 1993), p. 21.

destructive corruption.

Unfortunately for the leaders of ISIS, very few of the 1.7 billion people around the globe who identify as Muslims are prepared to challenge this corruption and fight the forces oppressing Muslims. ISIS does not consider those who avoid such confrontation as real Muslims, but rather as pretenders or "hypocrites" (*munafikun*) – a Quranic term for people who converted to Islam but refuse to fight against the enemies of the Prophet. According to ISIS leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, "the world has been divided into two camps […] with no third camp present: The camp of Islam and faith, and the camp of *kufr* (disbelief) and hypocrisy" (Dabiq 1:10). To him, non-believers and hypocrites are equally flawed in their faith, but the latter are much more dangerous as they present themselves as believing Muslims, introduce heresy into Islam, and lure believers astray. Al-Baghdadi's list of present-day hypocrites includes Shi'ites of various denominations, Muslim rulers and the clerics that serve them, and even the Muslim Brotherhood and similar religious movements that do not understand the importance of Jihad.

The use of the term 'hypocrite' indicates reliance on historical precedents from the time of the Prophet. The leaders of ISIS believe that what the movement is experiencing at present is a direct continuation of what the Prophet and his friends underwent in the 7th century. As they put it explicitly: "History repeats itself by Allah's divine decree" (Dabiq 4:32). This forms the basis for the elitist self-image of ISIS: just as the Prophet and his men were the chosen community in the early days of Islam, so ISIS are the chosen ones today.

Another analogy between ISIS and early Muslims relates to immigration (*hijrah*) – a fundamental concept in the history and philosophy of Islam. The leaders of ISIS hold that just as the Prophet and his men (*muhajirun*) emigrated from Mecca to Medina in the 7th century, so ISIS supporters must leave their homes and go to Syria (*Sham*). There they will join the largest group of immigrants in the world, which is training to fight the Christians in "the great battles prior to the Hour" (Dabiq 3:6). Just as the immigrants to Medina were the elite at the time, so those who join ISIS in Syria are today's elite.

This comparison to the Prophet and his followers helps ISIS leaders explain

why they are fighting on so many fronts, including against militant Islamist movements such as the Taliban and al-Qaeda: "Just as the Companions had to face coalitions of various Jewish, pagan, and hypocrite parties in the battle of al-Ahzab (the battle of the factions), the Muslims of the Islamic State face various coalitions of kuffar (apostates) having a common interest in seeing the Khilafah destroyed" (Dabiq 11:46). Rather than see the fact that the whole world is against them as a sign of diplomatic or tactical failure, ISIS believe that this proves their similarity to the Prophet and his supporters, who faced the same challenges.

Despite their belligerent declarations and professed self-confidence, ISIS leaders caution supporters that Islam and the movement are in jeopardy because true Islam is neglected and even abandoned by believers. To guarantee its position, ISIS must follow the path of original Islam, i.e. that of the Prophet Muhammad. According to al-'Adnani, members of ISIS are promised success as long as they keep away from pagans, "along with submitting to Allah's command in everything big and small" (al-'Adnani, "This is the Promise of Allah"). In practice, this means imitating the behavior of the Prophet and his friends and applying the laws of Islam literally. For instance, if Muslim law permits taking enemy women as slaves, ISIS will allow its fighters to take Yazidi women as slaves. If members fulfill all the commandments of the Quran, then the achievements of the Prophet and his friends – such as bringing together the tribes of the Arab peninsula under one nation and defeating neighboring nations – will be relived in their lifetimes.

Like other groups that feel rejected and oppressed, ISIS members believe they are on a grand mission regardless of their status in reality. Just as in the 7th century, the Prophet and his men started out as a small, persecuted group chosen by God to spread the true faith, so God has now chosen the small, persecuted group known as ISIS and is helping it purify Islam and spread the word throughout the world.

ISIS suffers the loneliness of purists, but interprets this isolation as testament to its status as a select minority. According to this logic, ISIS receives only scant support because it reveals to the world a truth that most people cannot handle.

The result is magnet-like: attracting a handful of supporters while repelling most Muslims around the world.

Apocalypse: The reality beyond reality

Members of ISIS are convinced they know something that the rest of us either do not know or could not handle if we did: that the human race is on the brink of the end of days, known in sacred Muslim texts as "the fierce wars" (*al-malahim al-kubra*). These wars mark the arrival of the *mahdi* (a figure similar to the Jewish messiah). Accordingly, ISIS see themselves as the messengers of God and cosmic goodness, who are destined to confront and overcome the forces of evil.[2]

ISIS' apocalyptic vision assumes the existence of a hidden reality that must be revealed (the original Greek *apokálypsis* means "uncovering the truth"); those who do not see this reality are blind. At the core of its conflict with the entire human race – professed Muslims and non-believers alike – lies the movement's understanding of history and reality. According to its apocalyptic scheme, the Prophet and his friends defeated opponents despite being outnumbered, conquered much of the known world at the time, and conferred Islam upon humanity. However, over time, Islam slid into moral decay and political decline, and lost its world dominance. It is ISIS' role to restore Islam to its former glory, building up the power to embark on "the fierce wars" (*al-malahim al-kubra*), vanquish enemies, and fulfil the apocalyptic vision of Islam.

This ideology, which merges past with future, yields a unique interpretation of the present. In order to build up Muslim power for the ultimate war, ISIS is re-establishing the Caliphate – an institution that symbolized the might of Islam until it was abolished in 1924, after the fall of the Ottoman Empire. Militant

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2 For a comprehensive discussion of ISIS and a detailed presentation of its apocalyptic views, see McCants, W., *The ISIS Apocalypse: The History, Strategy and Doomsday Vision of the Islamic State* (St. Martin's Press, 2015).

Islamist circles were shocked by this declaration, with most voicing harsh criticism of ISIS. But enthusiasts believe that under the Caliphate, they are building up the forces that will confront the armies of the rest of the world in northern Syria and specifically in Dabiq, a town mentioned in apocalyptic Muslim traditions as the site where Muslims will vanquish their enemies (Dabiq 1:40).

The leaders of ISIS believe that since they have a divine plan only they can decipher, they do not have to bother with mundane military analysis. As a result, they take on impossible fronts. By most estimates, ISIS has less than 50,000 fighters and is surrounded by hostile militias – Shi'ite, Kurdish, and even Sunni. The Turkish, Iraqi, and Syrian armies are operating in the vicinity, with varying degrees of strength. All these military and paramilitary forces are supported by global powers, which are taking a toll on ISIS with airpower. A rational analysis of this power balance would lead ISIS to seek out ways to ease the confrontation on various fronts. However, the organization steadfastly ignores this information and continues to carry out petrifying terror attacks such as those in Paris, Istanbul, and Brussels, goading its enemies into even greater use of military force.

ISIS members see themselves as more than just freedom fighters battling the oppressive West and corrupt Arab tyrants. Such a "modest" self-image can be attributed to al-Qaeda, which operates in a reality in which political and military strategy is determined based on estimated balances of power. ISIS functions in a parallel universe of sorts that is fueled by two fantasies: a delusion of omnipotence and a belief that it represents absolute justice.

The fantasy of power that ISIS cultivates is strikingly similar to that of apocalyptic Christian movements in the Middle Ages. In *The Pursuit of the Millennium*, Norman Cohn wrote that members of these medieval movements deemed themselves to be "more than human, Saints who could neither fail nor fall."[3] Similarly, ISIS members believe that they have been chosen by God and are directly guided by him, and are therefore above the

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3 Cohn, N. *The Pursuit of the Millennium: Revolutionary Millenarians and Mystical Anarchists of the Middle Ages*, (Oxford University Press, 1970), p. 85.

limitations of nature and history. The fantasy of having absolute justice on their side drives them to correct what they see as injustice, regardless of the cruelty this may involve. Their deep inner conviction has led to an inversion of morality, which not only permits but even commands that opponents be abused and murdered en masse.

These blinding fantasies are leading ISIS towards a military and political downfall. At the same time, they are also a source of power. The illusion of omnipotence sustains belief even in the face of failure. As long as young Muslims rage against what they see as injustice caused by corrupt rulers or by condescending European societies, and so long as they continue to seek ways to correct this, some will undoubtedly buy into these delusions of grandeur and join ISIS. Even if they are a negligible percent of Muslims around the world, this tiny force is enough to ensure ISIS' hold on areas where central governments have lost their grip.

Closing remarks

ISIS' fantasies echo the world's nightmares: both envisage the organization as disproportionally more powerful and threatening than it really is. In part, such rhetoric conveys the sincere, albeit megalomaniac, beliefs of ISIS devotees, as well as the candid anxieties of its potential victims. Yet in part, it is the outcome of unscrupulous pursuit of political interests. ISIS' sinister image is a product both of its own manipulations and of the inadvertent aid it receives from its Western enemies.

Western politicians, for instance, often abuse ISIS' image to attain electoral goals, even at the price of enhancing the organization's strength. Preying on American fears after the San Bernardino and Orlando attacks, Donald Trump opined a series of policy clichés that do not offer useful solutions but, rather, play into the hands of ISIS' incitement and war mongering. Speaking in favor of a discriminating immigration policy that would prevent nearly all Muslims from entering the United States, Trump handed ISIS another victory in the arena of psychological warfare. Targeting the Muslims collectively, as he did,

is precisely fanning the flames in the way that ISIS leaders would like to see, in the hope that this will offend Muslims, radicalize their views, and widen the gap between them and other Americans.

Even more cynical was Benjamin Netanyahu's manipulation of the ISIS phenomenon during the 2015 elections in Israel. A short while before they went to the ballots, his party, the Likud, aired a clip warning Israelis of ISIS' impending conquest of Jerusalem. As ISIS was losing territories and operating far from Israel, Netanyahu scared Israelis into voting for him by depicting ISIS as a real and immediate danger. In Israel, as in many European countries, politicians present the public with disingenuous information about ISIS, thus – perhaps unknowingly – promoting ISIS' goal of public intimidation.

Netanyahu's disinformation policy resembles the propaganda of one of the most notorious butchers in the modern Middle East, Bashar al-Assad. Both, like Abd al-Fattah al-Sisi, Egypt's autocratic ruler, regularly conflate ISIS with other Islamist movements such as the Muslim Brothers and Hamas. Although the gap between ISIS and the other movements is huge, these politicians have no qualms about using duplicitous facts to tarnish their enemies. Once again, ISIS' image is bolstered and transformed into a major threat that exceeds its true abilities by ascribing to the movement many more supporters than it actually has, and presence in areas it can barely reach in reality.

ISIS' image is distorted by politicians at the other end of the spectrum, too. Barak Obama's refusal to place ISIS within the orbit of Islam by labelling it "radical Islam" discredits him and the call to view Islam as a multifaceted phenomenon. It is essential to understand ISIS within the socio-religious framework of Islam in order to identify the Muslim intellectuals and religious leaders who have the tools to confront it and diminish its appeal. While all armies and security systems can combat ISIS with military means, only Muslim spiritual leaders can contest its religious credentials and lessen its impact on Muslims.

ISIS has become a pivotal reference point in international politics, primarily because of its psychological accomplishments and less due to its military performance. The exaggerated image built up around the movement is the

consequence of manipulation by countless players – first and foremost ISIS itself, but also some Western security officials, rating-starved media, and politicians of all persuasions – who attempt to promote their respective agendas. As a result of these outright lies, fabrications and distortions a cloud of disinformation has formed around ISIS that benefits the movement. As surprising and frustrating as it may be, the reactions of Western politicians and public opinion shapers actually bolsters ISIS' psychological warfare. Sadly, Western rhetoric has become a weapon in ISIS' arsenal. If Western pundits and politicians wish to stop being the unwitting accomplices of ISIS, they need to speak about the organization more professionally and responsibly.
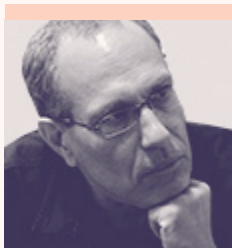
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