

The Islamic State Conundrum

The theatrical brutality of the Islamic State has found an audience among Muslims embittered by the West's longstanding violence against their people, including President George W. Bush's catastrophic war in Iraq, a dilemma that ex-CIA official Graham E. Fuller examines.

By Graham E. Fuller

The West remains transfixed with ISIS (Islamic State, Da'ish) and the debate about its character goes on. In one sense this discussion is totally understandable, given the movement's seeming sudden appearance on the public screen not much more than a year ago (although its roots were long since there), combined with its theatrical brutality, and extreme views and actions that make it impossible to ignore.

Over time, this debate seems to center around three key issues:

–Is ISIS driven essentially by theological and religious motivations? Or pragmatic political considerations?

–Is ISIS essentially a medieval movement in character, or a “modern” movement?

–Is the movement durable? Or is it a transient, radical, ultra-reactionary spasm in the tortured evolution of Iraq, a country still coming to terms with the U.S. destruction of the country's political and social infrastructure? And in Syria feeding off the tragic breakdown of order under Assad's gross and brutal mishandling of early Arab Spring rioting, that invited in the subsequent wars by proxy of external players?

The classic response to many such deep-rooted questions is “all of the above.” This isn't a cop-out answer, it simply reflects the complexity of the phenomenon we see.

ISIS is undeniably *religious* in that it draws on solid basis of Quranic scripture and the Hadith (the sayings and doings of the Prophet Muhammad.) It knows its theology and texts, but it is indeed highly selective in what texts it stresses, one might call it exegetical cherry-picking, something well-known in all religious traditions when scripture is invoked to political ends.

But ISIS is also undeniably *political* in that it has a clear political (not just moral) agenda, and a political strategy (though often improvised to meet circumstances); indeed the founding of a state (caliphate) is the supreme political act only made possible by the collapse of Iraq.

But which comes first, theology or politics? Chicken or egg?

In my experience in looking at ideology in the world over the years, I increasingly lean towards the sense that the political, indeed the psychological, impulse often *precedes* and shapes the ideological. If an ideological seed is to sprout, the receptive political/psychological soil must first exist (even if not always fully consciously).

Not just anyone suddenly exposed to violent ideology becomes radicalized or violent; they are radicalized only when an ideological *explanation* for their existing distress suddenly makes sense, rings true; the explanatory power comes as a revelation: "of course, that's the reason why all this is happening to us." And ideology suggests a path towards alleviating such hardship. In the absence of particular deep grievance then ideology does not find fertile soil.

Marxist communism made sense to young Americans during the Great Depression, but not today (at least not yet). Hitler's Nazi ravings would not have found resonance if Germany had not been the object of destructive political and economic revanchism by victorious and vindictive Allied Powers after World War I. The Russian Revolution and Lenin's charisma might have gone nowhere were it not for the desperate conditions in Tsarist Russia late in World War I. Examples abound.

The proximate cause for ISIS' dramatic appearance on the scene and its sudden success obviously could not have taken place without the destruction of Iraq's political, social and economic order and the American occupation. Assorted other grievances of Muslims living in the West as well as in the Middle East equally played into ISIS' message.

ISIS' political, cultural and ideological message draws on deeply resonant (but selective) Islamic themes, the symbolism of caliphate, literal adoption of selective early Islamic practices, but not resonant enough to make most Muslims really want to sign up. Most inhabitants of the Islamic State did not choose to do so in any case, ISIS chose them by conquering the turf where they live. The ISIS message becomes a harder sell when more moderate interpretations of political Islam (like the Muslim Brotherhood) offer a viable and contemporary Islamic alternative.

Is ISIS medieval in conception? Or modern? Both. Its theological precepts stem indeed from the earliest periods of Islam, often taken quite literally, hence its insistent claim to "authenticity." But ISIS is quite modern in its use of media, technology, PR, its playing to the international gallery, strategic global view, and its exploitation of existing international rivalries at work in the region.

The Taliban, for instance, also promoting a quite reactionary and retrogressive view of Islam, were clueless in terms of developing a PR story aimed at an international and modern audience of tech-savvy westernized Muslim youth.

So we need a holistic explanation of the ISIS phenomenon that embraces both the religious as well as the political explanations, and an awareness of its “medieval” as well as “modern” character.

Its survivability? I’ve gone on record in stating that I don’t think the ISIS model has much of a future. I don’t think it can really run a state for a long time without massive repressive techniques and permanent war. Its “solutions” to Muslim ills are not really solutions, a fact that will become ever more apparent to those inside and outside its boundaries.

Sadly, in the interim it is causing shocking cultural damage and brutalizing and killing a lot of people (mostly Muslims) in acts designed to shock with their “authenticity.” But the number of deaths from ISIS itself pale next to the ongoing deaths and devastation resulting from over a decade of western-imposed war.

Why do these arguments matter? I do not believe that the West itself can discredit ISIS on theological grounds; western motives are utterly suspect. Muslims, however, can undertake this mission. Regrettably some Muslim clerics who denounce ISIS lack real credibility themselves since they are perceived as “hired” clerics working for existing autocratic regimes.

But gradually the word is getting out that ISIS is not the future most Muslims aspire to at all. Ultimately Muslim forces themselves need to take on ISIS, although few regional regimes possess much real credibility either. The western role in this pushback needs to be circumspect and limited.

But above all, a restoration of political and social order in Iraq and Syria is the indispensable prerequisite to rolling ISIS itself back. Solutions to crises in both those states must assume highest priority.

Graham E. Fuller is a former senior CIA official, author of numerous books on the Muslim World; his latest book is *Breaking Faith: A novel of espionage and an American’s crisis of conscience in Pakistan*. (Amazon, Kindle) grahamefuller.com
