

ISIS and Islam: How a Terrorist's Ideology Twists Religion

On May 3, 2016, at the International Institute of Islamic Thought's headquarters in Herndon, VA, Asaad Al-Saleh (Indiana University; scholar-in-residence, IIIT) spoke on "ISIS and Islam: How a Terrorist's Ideology Twists Religion." He began by asking a question – Is ISIS Islamic or not? – and then proceeded to give a "simple point of view." He first drew a distinction between "Islam" and "Muslim," which he said is a very problematic thing to do. "Islam" is the text (i.e., the Qur'an and the Hadith literature). He contended that the battle with ISIS is mainly textual, for the Qur'an is a "textual container." Thus, anything beyond the Qur'an and Hadith texts cannot be considered purely Islamic, but only a human interpretation of the text. For example, if we take history, then "Islamic history" is a highly misrepresented label, for it is only "Muslims" who are participating in "history." This historical error dates from the third Islamic century, with the rise of the "Islamic sciences."

As ISIS is not textually Islamic, not a revealed entity from the heaven of Islam, it cannot be labeled "Islamic" without violating the boundaries of the Qur'an and Hadith. On the second level, if ISIS claims to be a Muslim body interpreting Islam, then its members are not following the agreed-upon rules of interpretation. For example, their selective interoperations not only work against the majority of Muslims, including the scholars of Islam, but they are also being labeled as "deviant" even by other terrorist groups, such as al-Qaeda.

Another branch of these sciences to which Al-Saleh referred was Islamic theology, which gradually developed a creed (*'aqidah*) to defeat the Khawarij and other non-Sunni groups. The Khawarij, which at one point in Muslim (*not* Islamic) history was a predecessor of ISIS, assassinated Ali, the reigning caliph and cousin of Prophet Muhammad, in 657 because he had agreed to arbitration after the Battle of Siffin. They contended that judgment belongs to God only, that arbitration violated God's rights, and were very quick to brand their opponents as unbelievers, thus practicing excommunication (*takfir*). Taking advantage of the ongoing debate over who was supposed to rule the Muslim community, they ignored the relevant background. Instead, they put forth their own understanding of what the Qur'an says based upon certain verses taken out of context, personalized them by asserting that the verse referred to "what

is in their minds,” and then proceeded to build a worldview from it. According to Al-Saleh, this was the beginning of sectarianism and systematic violence in the name of Islam. ISIS is a modern-day representative of the Khawarij, for it holds the same views. Both movements had been against Muslims who find their ideology non-Islamic.

In terms of the modern nation-state, Islam had very little role in its formation beyond the belief that it should provide *a* or *the* legal framework. Many people wanted a caliphate and the Shari‘ah, or at least a Qur’anic mandated rule. In this regard, ISIS and other Islamist groups translate the Qur’anic term *yahkum* to mean “to rule” or “to govern” (in reference to Q. 5:44), whereas in textual scholarship it means “to judge.” Some scholars said that this interpretation first appeared after the Prophet’s death; others say that it developed under the Umayyads.

In the 1960s, the Tanzīm al-Jihād group tried to establish an Islamic state in Egypt. They saw Nasser, then president of Egypt, as a tyrant (*tāghūt*). The speaker explained that this term does not necessarily mean “ruler” in *tafsīr* books, but that they nevertheless saw it that way and used it to justify their decision to get rid of him. This view was proposed by Muhammad Abd al-Salaam Faraj in his *The Missing Duty*, namely, jihad. A member of this group, Khalid Islambouli, killed Sadat during a celebratory parade in 1981; Faraj was executed the following year. Many who had adopted Faraj’s ideology were arrested; others went to fight alongside the Mujahideen in Afghanistan. When they began returning to their countries, they were not welcomed.

This strand of thought eventually joined Wahhabism, the official Saudi ideology that also practices *takfīr* to the extreme. Adherents of such groups see any resistance to them as resistance to Islam itself, which was not an entirely new development. In short, this exemplifies the attitude that “We are starting over with the true Islam.” Ibn Ghannam’s *History of Nejd* describes this viewpoint. Although this view was once legitimized by Saudi government during the surge of Wahhabism, Saudi Arabia is not responsible for ISIS, because the movement has drawn upon so many sources to build their ideology, including de-contextualized verses from the Qur’an. Interestingly, according to Al-Saleh, ISIS members consider Saudi Arabia to be a *kāfir* (non-Muslim) country.

Al-Saleh concluded his presentation with three remarks: (1) the members of ISIS believe that, like the Wahhabis and the Khawarij before them, they represent true Islam. Obviously, this is very problematic for all other Muslims; (2) ISIS has relocated Islam to the first three Islamic centuries, not modernity. Other groups share the same ideology, but want to accomplish it without em-

ploying violence; and (3) ISIS is reinventing Islam on the grounds that the Islam that we see today is not the true Islam.

During the ensuing Question and Answer session, Al-Saleh made the following points:

- ISIS, as well as al-Qaeda and other jihadi groups, justify their existence by identifying “enemies” who are “killing” Muslims. They see their own terrorist attacks as acts of revenge, for they view their actions as justified on the grounds that Islam is not about peace, but about violence.
- The ideology of ISIS cannot be fought by another ideology; it can only be contained through force. The group’s present strategy is to engage in so much killing and cause so much chaos that the people will finally agree to accept any ruler as long as he can stop the fighting. He stated that this was how the Khmer Rouge had gradually assumed power in Cambodia and then began to massacre the people in the name of a secular ideology that killed around 1.4 million people.
- Abu Musab al-Zarqawi (d. 2006), the godfather of ISIS, had started his own group in Iraq. Although he was not really member of al-Qaeda, he was their representative in Iraq. By the time he was killed, he had already set up the “Islamic State of Iraq.”
- It says that al-Qaeda is only attacking the West in order to hurt it, whereas ISIS wants to set up a state. Al-Qaeda was never an “Islamic” project, for it existed only to take revenge. ISIS, however, is an “Islamic” state with publically announced officials. But at the same time, it is clearly an anti-Islamic undertaking because it is trying to kill off the Sunni intelligentsia. The group had its own government by 2004 and proposed to many people: “You help us now, and when we become strong we will save Palestine.”
- Another inspiration behind this movement and its *takfirī* ideology was the writings of Sayyed Imam Al-Sharif (b. 1950), also known as “Dr. Fadl.” A friend of al-Qaeda’s leadership when he was in Afghanistan, upon his return to Egypt he was jailed. As soon as he was released in 2013, he made a public announcement that he regrets all that he has written and done.

Jay Willoughby
AJISS
Herndon, VA