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**Think wisely
Plan boldly
Act swiftly**



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The ISIS Mindset and Ways to Undermine ISIS Propaganda

PROPAGANDA plays a key role in ISIS recruitment and sustainment of its base. It is critical to understand the inner workings of the ISIS mindset. Ideological aspects that have major propagandist aspects have equal validity as military strength in understanding ISIS. Recruitment to ISIS, and sustainment of its core base, have powerful ideological underpinnings. Islamic eschatological concepts play an important role in understanding how ISIS functions and claims successes. Why does ISIS continue to be attractive for large groups of people from a variety of countries and regions? Islamic eschatology is a key lens through which to examine both the concepts and the practical operations of ISIS, and therefore understand ways to challenge this major threat. The propagandist aspects have to be countered in sophisticated and carefully orchestrated ways to undermine the very essence of ISIS's ideology and modus operandi.

Background

ISIS leaders have appealed to Islamic eschatology, the End of Time philosophy, in their opposition to the West.¹ The founder of the movement, Abu Mus'ab az-Zarqawi said: 'The Spark has been lit in Iraq, and its heat will continue to intensify, by Allah's permission, until it burns the Crusader Armies in Dabiq.'²

ISIS plays on the rise of Israel, the historic battle between the Muslims and the armies of the West, and the decline of Islamic tradition in Hijaz, the western part of Arabia, with Mecca and Medina in its centre. To counter these past trends ISIS foresees an Islamic revitalisation at Dabiq. This is a small village situated to the North of Aleppo. Dabiq is a place of great significance for most Muslims, comparable to Tel Megiddo in Israel for Christians, as the place of the 'Final Battle.' The word 'Armageddon' is derived from 'Tel Megiddo' in Hebrew. Like Tel Megiddo, Dabiq is surrounded by plains, which makes it an ideal point for a major battle in ISIS propaganda. In 1516 a battle took place there between the young Ottoman Empire and the Mamluk state, as a result of which the Mamluk regime collapsed in Syria.

A main ISIS instrument is propaganda. The magazine title *Dabiq* was not chosen by chance. It is symbolic. The first issue starts with detailed references to the eschatological Hadiths. (Hadiths are the reports claiming to quote what the prophet Muhammad says verbatim on any matter, themselves important tools for understanding the Qur'an.) These Hadiths take readers into ISIS 'End of Time' concepts. In the very introduction of the first issue the authors explain where such final battles are likely to occur. Syria, especially its northern part and Damascus province, plays a great role in these eschatological concepts. They are used by ISIS propaganda for attracting recruits, and imposing psychological pressure on Muslims worldwide. One of the articles in the third issue³ looks specifically at the role of Syria in an end of the world scenario, with Damascus as the focal point.

ISIS presents the restoration of the Caliphate as a political deed necessary for salvation, a hugely manipulative tool, with ISIS legislating the ways and means. Graeme Wood wrote that 'ISIS follows a distinctive variety of Islam whose beliefs about the path to the Day of Judgment matter to its strategy'.⁴ Secular actions are therefore holy duties, aimed at accelerating the approach to the End of Time.

The ISIS leadership appeals to the Signs of al-Malhama, taken from different Hadiths. The main signs, in ISIS-style Islamic parlance, are:

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- The Smoke above the Earth, pollution, is created by the 'Crusader' nations.
- Sunrise is from the West, a way of saying that life is turned upside down, like using paper money instead of precious metals.
- The Beast of the Earth (*Dabba al-Ard*) is represented as a Zionist movement, the state of Israel.
- The Earthquake in the East is attributed by ISIS propaganda as the December 2004 Asian Tsunami that claimed over 100,000 lives.
- The Earthquake in the West is associated with hurricanes such as Katrina in the US.
- The Earthquake in Arabia, the third of the earthquakes, is prophesied to happen when the invading armies of the West (*ar-Rum*), enter Kaaba.
- The Fire, coming out of Yemen (in some Hadiths as a consequence of the Arabian earthquake), is presented as the Yemeni Civil War, a form of ISIS prophecy. In another Islamic tradition, in *Sahih*, by Imam Abi Abdillah Muhammad al-Bukhari, the fire will come out of the land of Hijaz.⁵
- The Gog and Magog have been described as USA and Russia, and though ISIS has not yet used these names in its eschatological discourses, this may happen in the future.
- The people of *ar-Rum*, who will form the majority of the worldwide population, should be interpreted as a metaphor for Western culture. ISIS propaganda speaks of Western hypocrisy and apostasy, characterised by Western crusades against Moslems.
- Al-Mahdi will emerge as the last caliph of the Muslim *Umma*. He will lead the Muslim armies, as the Last Battle approaches, according to ISIS publicists, and al-Mahdi is the leader, uniting the '*Umma* body'. The concept of al-Mahdi has a rather weak tradition and many Islamic scholars reject his emergence,⁶ so at the moment it is difficult to assess whether ISIS propaganda will claim his appearance.

The minor signs are:

- Women will dress like men and vice versa.
- Homosexuality will become the way of life.
- Children born outside marriage will become commonplace.
- Muslims will become slaves. It is noteworthy that ISIS has organised slave markets. *Dabiq* claims slavery to be not only righteous but necessary, as it goes back to the Prophetic tradition, and was cancelled with the decline of earlier jihad practices.⁷
- The slave girl will give birth to her mistress and master. Adding to the previous Sign, one concludes that if a slave girl gives birth to a child of her free Muslim owner in Islamic State, then the child will also be considered as a free Muslim.
- Disproportionality will take place in the gender balance: 'one man would have to maintain 50 women'. The most significant example is seen in Saudi Arabia.
- Current events in the Gulf States are interpreted by ISIS as internecine Bedouin warfare.
- Treasure will be found in the Euphrates River. This could be simply interpreted as producing oil near Deir az-Zour, in ar-Raqqa province, and in Iraq. Oil is called 'the black gold' and can be considered as treasure, but some Hadiths warn not to take anything from this treasure, and others claim that there will be a great struggle for this treasure.
- Al-Harj (killing each other without righteous reason) must increase. Different versions of such Hadith appeared several times in *Dabiq*. Current ISIS merciless violence reflects this.

- The people (the Muslims) stop dividing inheritance and rejoicing at war booty. This sign is present now, as ISIS fighters join together and do not stop after every new battle to divide the spoils of war. Some Hadiths make a wider explanation, stating that there will be a great war in which the Muslims will lose every 99 of 100 men, and after the victory they will not be able to rejoice.
- The Muslims will fight the Jews and kill them all ('until the stone will say: Muslim, there is a Jew behind me, come and kill him'⁸). Such perspective is considered by ISIS leaders as the near future. After conquering Damascus the next goal is claimed to be Jerusalem, and the Jewish state of Israel itself.
- During the struggle between the Romans and the Muslims both sides paused to fight a common enemy. ISIS propaganda has not yet commented. A possible confrontation between two coalitions, led by USA and Russia, and participation of ISIS in this war, could be interpreted this way.
- The truthful person is belied and the liar is believed. The trustworthy is accused of treachery, the treacherous person is trusted, and the worthless person speaks about the affairs of the general public. This Hadith, reported by Imam Ahmad bin Hanbal, is quoted in *Dabiq* without any description, but its placement at the back cover of the issue is significant by itself and gives us clear allusions to contemporary politics.
- The people will begin to worship the ancient idols (in some versions *al-Lat* and *al-Uzza*, in others, *Dhi al-Khalassa*). According to ISIS propaganda, the Kharijites and Murji'ites (two branches of Islam, divided by political reasons, and who expounded their own versions of theological doctrine) are pagans, who are 'worse than Jews and Christians'. In the same way the Yazidis are blamed for their 'Satanism', as they accept Iblis (the Fallen Angel) as a forgiven angel.⁹ The topic of paganism is widely used by ISIS publicists and propaganda.

The challenge

ISIS has an ability psychologically to blackmail the Muslim world, by presenting two significant points. First, the Judgment Day is close (although the Qur'anic tradition implies that it is only Allah who knows), and the second is that the Caliphate (ISIS) is a means of facilitating its approach.

ISIS claims that the new Caliphate is an instrument of struggle for the 'pure Muslim world', for a new world of Islamic domination. ISIS propaganda tries to make Muslims feel the strong necessity of joining the Jihad against the Crusaders. ISIS quotes the Hadith, stating: 'Whoever dies without having bound himself by a *bay'a*, dies a death of *Jahiliyya*'.¹⁰ The *bay'a* in Islamic culture means the oath, that every member of the *Umma* (the Muslim international community) must take to the Caliph (as successor of the Prophet). For ages the *bay'a* was used as a means of uniting the *Umma* into a solid political community. *Jahiliyya* signifies the pre-Islamic era in Arabian history. For Muslims, 'a death of *Jahiliyya*', equates to finding themselves automatically in Hell. It is very easy to understand why an uneducated Muslim would be susceptible to this form of indoctrination. A Muslim is made to feel responsible for what is portrayed as a 'Common Islamic Duty'. ISIS reaches out with this doctrine not just to potential fighters but also professional specialists such as doctors, teachers, engineers, and business managers.

ISIS propaganda includes other doctrines other than the idea of the Final Battle. One of the Hadiths, quoted in the *Dabiq* magazine, states: 'You will invade the Arabian Peninsula,

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and Allah will enable you to conquer it. You will then invade Persia, and Allah will enable you to conquer it. You will then invade Rome, and Allah will enable you to conquer it. Then you will fight the *Dajjal*, and Allah will enable you to conquer him'.¹¹ In this narration the time of *Dajjal*'s appearance and fall is ascribed to be after all these various conquests. It is usually understood that the Arabic term '*ar-Rum*' meant not the European Rome but Constantinople. In ISIS propaganda the Italian capital itself is attributed to be the final goal before the establishment of the global Muslim state.

In ISIS propaganda the emergence of *Dajjal* follows the capture of most parts of the Mediterranean, including Rome. The descent of 'Isa in this context is also used as a great symbol. ISIS plays on Muslim eschatological tradition regarding Jesus Christ, who is considered a mortal. Christ is depicted as playing a symbolic rather than a divine role, a 'fabricated' divine image created by the Christian Church. This view of Christianity is exploited by the ISIS leadership. 'The bulk of all *jihad* was against the cross-worshipping Romans with Sham playing an important role in all the wars between the Muslims and the Crusaders. And this will be the case until their *taghut* (idol, pagan) cross is broken by the *Massa* (Messiah) 'Isa'.¹² This is pure ISIS propaganda not just against Christianity but also against the very structure of Western democratic nations with Christian cultural and ethical traditions, an attack on Western civilisation. ISIS leadership has perverted Muslim literature in selective ways in order to argue for strong opposition to global Christianity and for rule by the sword aggression against the West. ISIS-trained recruits are trained to relive the past and prophetic tradition, and to believe and accept that all manner of cruelty, torture, rape and beheadings are lawful to further Islamic domination over the non-ISIS world. ISIS propaganda indoctrinates recruits to believe that they are 'the best people' and the Muslim *Umma* must prevail over all global communities.

The prestigious Hadith anthology, *Sahih*, by Imam al-Bukhari, states: 'You are the best people. You bring them in chains around their necks, until they enter Islam'. Recruits are told to believe that the new ISIS-backed Caliphate is the way to restore past glory. Restoring such glory in Sham, or Levant, means the approach of the Day of Judgment. The ISIS leader, Emir of Syria Abu Muhammad al-Adnani, said, (quoting Hadith): 'We will conquer your Rome, break your crosses and enslave your women, and this certainty is the one that should pulse in the heart of every *mujahid* from the Islamic State and every supporter outside until he fights the Roman Crusaders near Dabiq'.¹³ This is frightening language from a Western perspective. Aggressive ISIS policy and eschatological concepts are linked in practical warfighting terms, together with recruitment and state building, that includes basics such as taxation and jurisprudence.

Western scholars brought up in a fundamentally different cultural and ethical tradition are at odds naturally with ISIS propagandist-based statehood concepts. ISIS uses the Hadith for its own propagandist purposes: 'Whoever is killed under a blind banner, calling to '*asabiyya* (tribalism) dies a death of *jahiliyya*'.¹⁴ There is no ISIS scholarly tradition as is shown by the above analysis. Means are required to undermine this propaganda. The ISIS mindset and that of recruits must be penetrated with alternatives that not only destroy their perfidious deconstruction of Islam, but offer practical ways out that are not life threatening at the hands of ISIS despotism. ISIS is not just clothed in its own version of Islamic righteousness, but is the harbinger of reshaping the Middle East, as a physical set of states, borders, regimes, and as a religious and cultural region. ISIS targets global Islam along medieval lines, teleporting itself into the lives of modern society. ISIS propagandist eschatological concepts are at the

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heart of their conversion process because they address, like most world religions, an abiding issue, 'What will be Hereafter?' This propaganda has to be addressed, faced head on, and undermined with legitimate alternatives.

ISIS leadership is calling to its recruits and followers with such cries as: 'Rush to the shade of the Islamic state with your parents, siblings, spouses and children. There are homes for you and your family. You can be a major contributor towards the liberation of Makkah, Madinah and al-Quds. Would you not like to reach Judgment Day with these grand deeds in your scales?'¹⁵ In this context it is very important to quote the key relevant passages from the Qur'an:

- 'And those who believe and do good deeds, they are dwellers of the Paradise, they dwell therein forever.' (2:82)
- But those who die while not believing that 'There is no true god but God, and Muhammad is the Messenger of God' or are not Muslims, will lose the Paradise forever and will be sent to the Hellfire, as God has said: 'And whoever seeks a religion other than Islam, it will not be accepted from him and he will be one of the losers in the Hereafter.' (3:85)

The return of ISIS foreign fighters back to their native countries has to be analysed in the context of the above doctrine. It must never be forgotten that ISIS propaganda goes to extremes: Being killed, according to ISIS, is a victory. 'You fight a people who can never be defeated',¹⁶ declared Abu Muhammad al-'Adnani. The return of ISIS-propagandised Americans and Europeans to their native countries must be met with the most careful scrutiny and surveillance. Above all, the propaganda and indoctrination has to be countered. In order to do this effectively all nations will require a holistic approach, not just by their security, counter-intelligence, and counter-terrorist agencies, but also the community as a whole as representative of the alternate society and culture. Like all propagandist cultures ISIS demands that they recruit and convert on their home soil. This factor alone is urgent enough that Western governments, civic, and religious leaders, must collectively address this challenge. It is not just a government problem, but a total community responsibility.

Conclusion and way ahead

ISIS exploits Hadiths in selective ways, removing anything that challenges its leadership. For example, in *Sahih*, by Imam al-Bukhari, the most influential and authoritative author of Islamic tradition: 'I heard the truthful and trusted by Allah (i.e. the Prophet, Peace be upon Him) saying, "The destruction of my followers will be through hands of young men from Quraish"'.¹⁷ Taking into account that the Caliph, and the Head of the Islamic State, Abu-Bakr al-Baghdadi, is from the Quraishi people himself, this Hadith could be interpreted most negatively for ISIS by many Islamic scholars. This provides scope, as just one example, for the Hadith itself to be used to contradict ISIS propaganda.

There are two radically different pressures operating in the contemporary Arab world: a push to democratise via secular elections, with equality between the men and the women; and a tendency to return to the times of the Prophet by rejecting all principles of Western society, while accepting some Western achievements, such as technical and military inventions and, for example, the style of male clothing. ISIS is not alone in the latter regard. However, ISIS is the clearest and the most manifest model. ISIS leadership twists Islamic culture by using selective texts and by interpreting them for their own purposes. ISIS has gone beyond Syria and Iraq to active operations in Nigeria, Libya, Egypt, China (Xinjiang), and to separate terrorist attacks in Europe and in other parts of the Arab world (Tunis, Kuwait).

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Muslims must be given the opportunity to read the original and pure versions of the Qur'an and the Hadiths to circumvent the effects of ISIS propaganda, simply by having access to their cultural and theological heritage. Muslims should be encouraged to understand that there is no directive in the Qur'an to destroy the West, to kill all who do not believe in a God, in the 'only righteous Muslim' way, and that no one religion knows when the End of Time will come, and there is no such last battle between the Islamic cultural heritage and the rest of civilisation.

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Glossary

Al-Harj (الهرج): a term from the Hadiths, which means killing each other or struggling with each other in a chaotic way without any reason.

Al-Malhama (الملحمة), or **al-Malhama al-Kubra (الملحمة الكبرى)**: the last battle between good and evil, the believers and the disbelievers or, in simplistic terms, between the Muslims and the Western warriors. This battle is preceding the arrival of the Antichrist and then the descent of Jesus Christ, who will kill Antichrist and open the last epoch before the Judgment Day.

Ar-Rum (الروم): a collective term meaning, in most interpretations, the West. Primarily 'ar-Rum' was attributed to the Byzantine Empire, but some time later (especially after the Crusades that were led from Rome) it was ascribed to all Western Christian civilisation, and after the rise of the Zionist movement, and Western contribution to the creation of Israel, to the whole Western 'Jewish-Christian' space.

'Asabiyya (عصبية): an old term, meaning 'the pride of own tribe', or in a wider context, tribalism.

Ash-Sham (الشام): an old Semitic term that could mean three different places: the very city of Damascus, Syria, and Levant (Greater Syria) including Lebanon, Jordan, Palestine, Israel, the Hatay province of Turkey, and sometimes Iraq, Sinai, Kuwait, and some northern parts of Saudi Arabia.

Bay'a (بيعة): an Arabic word meaning the oath that every member of the Umma must take to the caliph. By the rules, every caliph must be elected by the Muslim community, and the oath itself presents agreement with Umma's decision.

Dabba al-Ard (دابة الأرض): in the Islamic tradition the beast that will be sent against mankind after Sunrise.

Dajjal (دجال), or **al-Masih ad-Dajjal (المسيح الدجال)**: an Islamic equivalent of the Antichrist, who will emerge on Earth after the Final Battle between the Muslims and Evil, in order to embarrass Muslims.

Hādith (حديث): a report concerning what the Prophet Muhammad said on a given matter.

Hijra (هجرة): an Arabic word meaning, 'a migration'. Two of the main prophets, Ibrahim (Abraham) and Muhammad, committed hijra in order to find a place for extending their religion. It is now used as a migration from disbelievers' lands to Muslim land (or, in ISIS discourse, to the Islamic State itself).

ʿIsa (عيسى): an Islamic equivalent of Jesus Christ, who is in Qurʾanic tradition one of the prophets of Allah.

Jahiliyya (جاهلية): the period of Arabian history before the revelation of the Prophet Muhammad, literally means in Arabic, 'ignorance', and refers to polytheism and paganism of the Arabian nomadic tribes before the birth of Islam.

Jihad (جهاد): a complicated Islamic concept of fighting in the ways of God, including the inner fighting (when the believer overcomes sinful ways), and fighting with non-Muslims. The last is interpreted in many classical works in different ways.

Jizya (جزية): a special tax for Christians and Jews living in the lands of the Muslims in exchange for giving them defence and safety guarantees.

Kharijits, or Khawarij (خوارج): the Muslim branch that broke into revolt in the early stages of Islam for political reasons (they accepted only the first two caliphs) and produced their own political and social systems, significantly different from Sunni culture.

Mujahid (مجاهد): an Arabic word, meaning a man, fighting in the Jihad.

Murji'its, or Murji'a (مرجئة): the Muslim branch with liberal ideology (for example, sin does not spoil a believer's faith, according to their doctrine).

Quraish (قریش): the name of the tribe living in Hijaz. The Prophet Muhammad was from the Quraish tribe.

Taghut (طاغوت): an Arabic word, meaning 'idol', or 'pagan', usually used in ISIS propaganda, and attributed to all secular leaders of the Arab world (note: all leaders, excluding the Caliph, are seen as secular).

Umma (أمة): an Arabic word meaning 'community', and often used to describe the worldwide Muslim community.

Yowm al-Qiyama (يوم القيامة): an Islamic equivalent to the Day of Resurrection, and the End of Time.

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