

The Genealogy, Ideology, and Future of ISIL and its Derivatives

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Abstract: The organization known today simply as the “Islamic State” has historical and ideological roots that go beyond the territories it now controls. These deep roots give ISIL confidence that it will succeed, but give others reason to believe that it will fail. Mixing a puritan religious and political discourse, ISIL managed to dominate all other armed opposition groups in conflict zones (Somalia, Syria, Iraq, Yemen, and Libya) and has inspired individuals in many other countries (Pakistan, France, Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, and Tunisia) to carry out brutal attacks in its name.

Outline: (1) Creed/dogma of ISIL and its Derivatives, (2) Political origins of ISIL, and (3) ISIL’s connections.

Dogmatic Origins: Traditionism

In Islamic societies throughout history, Islam has been defined by one fundamental question: are religious foundational principles, as expressed in the Qur’an, created or eternal? For more than two centuries, Muslim religious scholars’ opinion, which informed political authorities, held that religious principles were created. Individuals seeking government jobs were required to answer a simple yes/no question: is the Qur’an created? The correct answer during the first two centuries was yes. This era, on balance, could be called the Age of Reason I, during which a school of thought known as al-Mu’tazilah—generally categorized as Reasonists (*Ahl al-ra’y*)—dominated public life.

With time, this elite theological and legal position, which was backed by the office of the caliph, grew stronger and became a tool for suppressing dissent. Resistance was inevitable. Some religious scholars refused to go along and produce the expected answer, choosing instead to say, “it was God’s words.” These figures were known as Traditionists (*Ahl al-hadith*), as opposed to Reasonists. While Reasonists held that reason and circumstance must play a role in interpreting and applying religious principles and imperatives, Traditionists believed that tradition cannot be superseded by reason or circumstance.

There are many other points of contention that divided Muslim communities during the formative period (first three centuries) of Islam along at least three sects (Ibadism, Sunnism, and Shi'ism) and eight legal denominations (Malikism, Ja'farism, Hanafism, Hanbalism, Shafi'ism, Zaydism, Isma'ilism, and Ibadism). However, the point of contention that truly explains current crises in Islamic societies is whether religious principles are tools to promote social justice and address social problems, or whether they are sacred principles that must be applied regardless of their effect on humans. Division over the primacy of religious principles cuts across sectarian and legal currents, most pronouncedly among the so-called Sunni communities.

Traditionism in the context of Islamic societies is best expressed in Hanbalism, the school of thought founded by Ahmad Ibn Hanbal in the first half of the third Islamic Century. Traditionism, called Salafism by its adherents, holds that the purity and authenticity of Islam is ascertained through an organic chain of authorities and institutions that connect today's Muslim community to the original teachings and practices of Islam through the opinions and practices of the ancestors (*salaf*). The Salaf, thus understood, consists of the Companions of the Prophet Muhammad (*Sahabah*), the Followers of (or those who came after) the Companions (*Tabi'in*), the Followers of the Followers (*Tabi'i al-tabi'in*), and the masters of the schools of jurisprudence (*Ayimmah, Mujtahidun*). Although, in principle, Salafists contend that opinions of any of masters of the four Sunni schools of jurisprudence (Malikism, Hanafism, Hanbalism, Shafi'ism) are equally authoritative, in reality, Salafist scholars privilege Hanbalism over all other schools of thought. To some extent, according to Salafism, the authentic sayings and practices of ancestors are as authoritative as the texts of the Qur'an itself. A true Salafist cannot rely on reason to override the opinion and practice of a Companion of the Prophet or a Follower of a Companion of the Prophet.

Ultimately, Salafism is a specific stream of Traditionist interpretation of Islam that relies on a selective chain of scholars that inform the broader base of adherents. The chain of Salafi scholars is not continuous. It is bridged by textual traditions that inform modern figures about opinions of their predecessors who might have lived a century or two apart. For example, modern Salafi figures like Ussama Bin Laden, Ayman al-Zawahiri, Umar Mahmoud Uthman (Abu Qutada al-Filistini), Isam al-Barqawi (Abu Mohammed al-Maqdisi), Abu Azzam al-Jazrawi, Abdullah al-Muhaisini, Mustafa al-Jakiri al-Rifa'i (Abu Mus'ab al-Suri), Ibrahim Awwad al-Samura'i (Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi), cite works of individuals whom they never met like Mohammed Ibn Abd al-

Wahhab, Ibn Taymiyya, Ibn Qayyim, and Ahmad Ibn Hanbal. In the end, modern Salafism is ancient Traditionism reconstructed from text-based historical events and sayings.

Today, the struggle that is fueling civil wars and sectarian tension is about the function and status of *shari`a*, one of the generic terms that refers to religious legal principles and imperatives, which are believed to be derived from the primary sources of Islamic traditions and practices. As it has been the case throughout the history of Islamic societies, what distinguishes Reasonist Muslims from Salafists is the answer to one general question: *Is the shari`a a tool for realizing social justice on earth or are humans mere agents that must be sacrificed to impose the shari`a?*

Political Origins: Umayyad Caliphate System

Salafism is about religious tradition and the preservation of that tradition in its purest form. According to Salafi dogma, any deviation from established understanding of religious norms and practices is an innovation, and any innovation is strictly prohibited. The preservation of established tradition goes beyond religious texts. It is also about accepting the political order as is. For Traditionists, the caliphs were guardians of religious traditions. To raise doubt about any given caliph's ethical and legal standing would amount to raising doubt about the authenticity and transcendence of religious truths. Therefore, Salafism does not dwell on the causes of the civil wars during the reign of the third and fourth caliphs, does not dwell on the transgressions and crimes of the Umayyads, and does not challenge the reign of the Saud clan over Arabia as long as the Saudi rulers act as protectors of pure Sunni Islam and guardians of holy places.

It is worth noting that Traditionism was most successful when it was allied with political rulers. Traditionists were strong when al-Mutawakkil adopted their teachings as Sunni orthodoxy. Salafis are strong now because of their alliance with the wealthy rulers of Saudi Arabia. State-enabled theology was their best path to project influence. Their disdain for reason limited their ability to influence public opinion through the deliberative processes, and because of that they prefer a top-down process of imposing what they see as religious principle.

The most advantageous path to power and influence for Salafism is through the brute force of the sword or gun and strong alliances with powerful governments. By declaring the re-establishment of the caliphate, ISIL essentially declared Salafi independence from the Saudi patronage that

sustained Salafism for nearly a century. Salafism is now enabled by the “Islamic State,” formerly known as the ISIL, which was formerly a branch of al-Qaeda.

ISIL’s Connections: U.S.-Saudi-Wahhabi Tripartite

In modern times, and in order to keep Salafists in check, the sponsors of the Traditionist creed created two streams of Salafism, each built on a distinct strategy:

1. Religious purity/authenticity is ascertained through separation of religion from politics. This path created a form of secularism that recognized two parallel authorities—one religious and one political. These Traditionists formed the *Da`wa wa-tabligh* groups, who went on proselytizing without engaging political issues. In return they were allowed to preach publicly and enjoy some governmental and private support. These groups are generally known as Learned Traditionism (*Salafiyya `ilmiyya*).

2. To meet some international challenges and to help project influence globally, the sponsors and sustainers of Traditionists also encouraged some Salafis to combat ungodly ideologies, like communism and atheism. They were told that stopping the spread of communism and atheism was a praiseworthy endeavor if not a religious obligation. These adherents subscribed to Militant Traditionism (*Salafiyya jihadiyya*).

Eventually, the two groups complemented one another. Learned Traditionists provided ideological purity. They helped produced the body of literature, institutions, and networks that sustained Traditionism in general. When necessary, these ideologically trained adherents joined Militant Traditionists in defense of the *ummah* (community) from ungodly ideologies such as communism in Afghanistan—justifying the war against the Soviet Union. They also worked to impose religious order on corrupted Muslim societies, i.e., Somalia, Nigeria, Algeria, and now Libya and Syria.

What we ought to remember, however, is that the US-Saudi alliance that empowered Militant Traditionists in Afghanistan produced Bin Laden and al-Qaeda. The invasion of Iraq and the US-Saudi alliance against Assad in Syria produced ISIL. These are not academic speculations. Even the architects of the Iraq war admit as much. Tony Blair, President Bush’s ally and supporter of the illegal invasion of Iraq recently declared:

Of course you can't say that those of us who removed Saddam in 2003 bear no responsibility for the situation [in Iraq] in 2015... There are elements of truth in the fact that the invasion is responsible for the rise of ISIS. –Tony Blair, CNN, October 25, 2015).

The Future of ISIL and its Derivatives:

ISIL is the expression of a Traditionist position that is present in all Semitic traditions, if not all religions. As the data shows, Traditionists who do not believe in broad, free public participation in defining and applying religious traditions are strongest when enabled by the state or when relying on brute force to impose their will top-down. This model cannot survive the test of time.

ISIL's teachings and practices might be enough to sustain a culture. But it will never be able to sustain a worldview or civilization. Militant Traditionism is a backward-looking ideology with no place for diversity, plurality, reason, art, or any other human invention that has no roots in the formative period of Islam. An ideology that aspires to establishing a monolithic society is in conflict with itself and with human nature. Even the literal interpretation of some Islamic texts suggest that God does not wish to coerce all humans into accepting one faith: "Had your Lord wished it, He could have made all of the earth's inhabitants, all of them, believers. Is it up to you, then, to force people to believe?" [Qur'an: Yunis, 99], see also [Qur'an: Hud, 118-9].

To aim for an earth inhabited by people who follow a single creed and live by one law is to be genocidal in thinking and delusional in aspiration. Neither religious tradition nor historical records support the Traditionists' position and aims. The world in which we live has always been full of people with diverse ideas, diverse racial backgrounds, and diverse social order. Even throughout the history of Islamic societies, there has never been a caliphate that imposed one law and one orthodoxy and lasted beyond the reign of one caliph or one dynasty. Even the most idealized caliphal period, known as the Righteously Guided Caliphate, was full of dissent, tension, rebellion, revolution, and bloodshed.

Another problem with the ideology espoused by ISIL and its derivatives is that it is an elitist, top-down vision of Islam because it is derived from textual evidence. Writing is not an activity that preserves the values and practices of the masses, ordinary people, or the consensus of the community. Writing has been, for most of history, a mode of communication dominated by the

elite, the wealthy, and the powerful. Writing and publishing is an expensive and complex mode of producing narratives and recording historical events. Historical written texts are not inclusive or diverse. To reconstruct Islam through the interpretation of a select group of ancient texts is to presume that those texts represented a broad consensus or authoritative preservation of Islam. They do not. Islam was once said to be the religion of an illiterate for the illiterate. Then it was co-opted by the elite like the Umayyads, in the second half of 7th century, and the Saud Clan, in the 20th century.

Salafism exists today because it aligned itself, directly and indirectly, with two of the most powerful political orders in the world: a regional power, Saudi Arabia, and a global power, the United States. Salafism's reach and influence are deep because they are enabled by state agencies and the generosity of wealthy individuals from Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, Kuwait, and Qatar.

The Arab Spring put in motion a movement whose effects cannot be fully contained, reversed, or redirected. The Arab countries must adapt to a new reality where the public no longer fears its rulers. This problem is more complex for Saudi Arabia. For nearly a century, the rulers of Saudi Arabia presided over a society with no civil institutions like opposition political parties, a free press, or non-governmental organizations—society is dominated by the corrupt clan government or by Salafi religious institutions. Should the Saudi government fall, the only group that would be prepared to take power is the Salafist, a religious order that aspire to dominate all who others who do not share its views and beliefs.

Of course, there is another alternative. The Saudi rulers could stop blaming their neighbors, abandon their sectarian rhetoric, and allow scholars from other Sunni schools of thought to engage and challenge Salafism, which has enjoyed a virtual monopoly over educational and religious institutions since the Kingdom was founded.

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