



**STRATEGIC
REVIEW**

Theology matters: The case of jihadi Islam

Rüdiger Lohlker

is professor for Islamic Studies at the University of Vienna in Austria. His fields of research include Islamic extremist movements and the history of Islamic ideas.

An intense debate has raged for many years in Europe and North America as to whether the ideational products of jihadi groups are to be understood as religious or merely ideological. The dominant narrative among Western governments, policy experts and the mainstream media has been that Al Qaeda and other jihadi groups embrace a violent “ideology,” rather than specific religious doctrines that pervade and drive their agenda.

The fact that jihadis have produced a significant volume of textual and audio/visual resources that directly address religious issues, most strikingly beneath the umbrella of Al Qaeda (Lohlker 2009) and the Islamic State (IS) (Lohlker 2016a) – also known as the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS) – may justify our questioning this common assumption. Thousands of pages of text and countless gigabytes of audio/visual material have been devoted to the discussion of religious matters and the construction of a jihadi-type religion, which may

be described as a “jihadi Islam.” Indeed, it is crystal clear to virtually anyone who has the linguistic capacity to grasp and the opportunity to witness what jihadists are actually saying, writing and doing, both online and offline, that religion matters.

Since this is not the place for a lengthy discussion of religion in general, as tempting as that may be for a scholar of religion, we will restrict ourselves to a more pragmatic distinction and approach this issue from the perspective of jihadi communications. Specifically, we shall focus upon the establishment of a religious-ethical community of jihadis by means of communication. In doing so, let us bear in mind that terrorism itself may be regarded as a form of communication (Waldmann 2005: 13). We will talk about religion, so long as:

“One pole of the communication has ... [a] non-human, non-empirical, *transcendent*, or ‘*supernatural*’ character, the communication may count as religious. It is the negative definition ... that gives religion in modern global society its fluidity and ambiguity, allowing the construction of cultural entities as religion if only they can be convincingly established as such.” (Beyer 2001: 144)

Turning to IS, we may reliably state that it devotes significant resources to the production of explicitly religious material, including books that teach Islamic creed (*‘aqīda*), Koranic exegesis (*tafsīr*) and Hadith (traditions ascribed to the Prophet Muhammad), to cite

but a few examples. This is done intentionally, not in order to camouflage the “real” interests of IS (eg, the acquisition of power, wealth or anything else), but because religion matters to IS and its followers, and constitutes the “real thing” for them.

If we understand ideology as not merely a set of ideas, be they political, economic, philosophical or religious, we may discern a clear distinction between ideology and theology/religion. Consulting standard texts on ideology, we may encounter (as an example, British literary theorist Terry Eagleton’s “Ideology: An Introduction”) a list of 16 types of ideology (Eagleton 1991: 1-2). Some are general and others particular, yet all refer to the ideas and behavior of social groups. Marxists, for example, describe religious belief as “false” and “inverted” consciousness (Rehmann 2013: 5). Other scholars tend to categorize and differentiate between three types of ideology: a) those characterized by certain errors caused by epistemological shortcomings; b) a system of ideas and values; and c) a social and political program (Tepe 2012, 1-2).

These ways of conceptualizing ideology all betray a reluctance to acknowledge that religion may still be “alive” in the post-modern era, and may even be part of the realms of evil – at least to some extent. Failure to recognize the importance of religion to others’ motivation and behavior reflects a Western prejudice that emerged in the 1960s, for it conflicts with the paradigm of “the inevitable decline of religion.” Denial of the centrality of religion to jihadis’ motivation and behavior may also constitute an attempt to absolve religion (and in particular, Islam) from the

Failure to recognize the importance of religion to others' motivation and behavior reflects a Western prejudice that emerged in the 1960s.

commission of violence, even if said violence is committed by persons acting from within an explicitly religious frame of reference. Jihadists do not subscribe to this paradigm. One reason for this may be glimpsed from Eagleton's remark, below, concerning ideology:

The study of ideology is among other things an inquiry into the ways in which people may come to invest in their own unhappiness. It is because being oppressed sometimes brings with it some slim bonuses that we are occasionally prepared to put up with it. The most efficient oppressor is the one who persuades his underlings to love, desire and identify with his power; and any practice of political emancipation thus involves that most difficult of all forms of liberation: freeing ourselves from ourselves. The other side of the story, however, is equally important. For if such dominion fails to yield its victims sufficient gratification over an extended period of time, then it is certain that they will finally revolt against it.

Since the history of religion is full of cases of cognitive dissonance, which resulted in reinforcement of the same behavior that led to the experience of dissonance in the first place,

we may assume that “the transcendent realm” (note above) helps to sustain belief, even if gratification does not appear in this world. A paradigmatic case is the repeatedly observed phenomenon in which members of a religious community continue to believe in the wisdom and power of their leader, even after his or her prediction of the imminent end of the world has failed to materialize.

This conceptual discussion is not an exercise in academic nit-picking. Rather, it implies that without deconstructing the theology of violence inherent in jihadi communications and practice, these religious ideas will continue to inspire others to act, long after any given organized force, such as the Islamic State, may be destroyed on the ground. This is not to deny the need for well-funded social work, interventions within families and institutions (such as schools and prisons) or even effective police action.

Flatly denying the importance of religion causes many in the West to overlook a crucial element of jihadi thought and action. This is particularly evident with regard to the mantras so often repeated in the wake of each new terrorist attack, such as: “Islam is the religion of peace.” The claim that religion motivates only positive behavior among human beings, and the implicit denial that religion may ever legitimize negative behavior, cannot withstand intellectual scrutiny. History provides countless examples of both positive and negative behavior legitimized by religion. Even if we abhor jihadis' use of Islamic religious concepts, we cannot deny the fact that they are trying to cut out, and render dominant, their own version of Islam as a religion of violence.

The only way to deconstruct this violent form of religion is to develop alternative forms of religion capable of resisting the theology of violence, which is characterized by apologetics that simultaneously demand and legitimize authoritarianism, sociocultural and religious homogeneity, and the strict demarcation of boundaries (see below). This jihadi religion of violence is currently being disseminated throughout much of the world through a complex set of mechanisms, whose widely diverse forms and content are mutually reinforcing. The elements of this complex online and offline dissemination structure include, more or less, elaborate theological

Even if we abhor jihadis' use of Islamic religious concepts, we cannot deny the fact that they are trying to cut out, and render dominant, their own version of Islam as a religion of violence.

tracts; smaller booklets; condensed texts (such as four- to six-page leaflets); public speeches, events and propaganda meetings in mosques (*da'wa*); videos; posters in public spaces; the issuance of forms and declarations that individuals who have been accepted by a jihadi group are not unbelievers (*kufar*); and, of course, face-to-face communication

itself. All these acts of communication convey one message in an extremely coherent manner: there is an Islamic entity, which is the organized form of **true** Islam.

It is understandable that many Muslims react by declaring that "IS-Islam" is "un-Islamic" and alien to their religion. However, since IS and other jihadi propaganda does not target persons who are firmly anchored in an alternate understanding of their faith, and does actually tap into significant elements of Islamic heritage, the aforementioned "denial response" may be viewed as that of believers who do not recognize, or do not wish to recognize, the religion they profess when confronted with the brutal crimes committed by terrorists in the name of Islam, and thus refuse to acknowledge the terrorists' thoughts and actions as religiously based.

Whatever motivates this reaction on the part of mainstream Muslims, and their counterparts in the West, this denial response will not solve the problem we face, nor destroy the religious appeal of jihadi Islam. Turning again to Terry Eagleton, the critique of ideology he describes may also be relevant to the theology of violence, indicating that we must acknowledge and address, rather than ignore, the religious elements thereof:

[O]nly those interventions will work which make sense to the mystified subject itself. ... "Critique" is that form of discourse which seeks to inhabit the experience of the subject from inside, in order to elicit those "valid" features of that experience which point beyond the subject's present condition (Eagleton 1991: XIV).

But now we must turn to theology and religion, leaving ideology aside.

Religion

In this section, we will turn away from discussing whether “ideology” is an accurate term to describe the phenomenon in question, and instead focus upon religion as a concept that may be useful to understand what is frequently and somewhat awkwardly described as “religiously-motivated terrorism,” in order to avoid eliciting a negative response from believers. As history clearly proves, violence is a contingent possibility in religion(s). Acknowledging this fact, and possibility, does not constitute an insult to or “defamation of” religion. Rather, it is a necessary step if we are to understand, identify, marginalize and ultimately defeat those who advocate violence. By acknowledging the contingency of a violent turn, the possibility of religious adherents embracing nonviolence is acknowledged as well.

Religion only exists through believers “doing,” or practicing, religion. Alternative, nonviolent ways of practicing religion are what is needed, and not merely for Islam.

Excluding religion from the picture, especially in the case of jihadi Islam, is an attempt to reproduce the constellation of politics and religion in European modernity on a theoretical level, and apply this to the Muslim world. Such an attempt fails to take into account that the configuration of politics and religion may differ in other regions of the world outside of Western Europe. It also fails to take into account that what may be true at the level of governmental affairs in Europe,

and to some extent within the framework of European theoretical/academic discussion, may not hold true at the grassroots level of Western societies themselves. Hence, the surprising “revival” of religion since the 1970s has occurred more in the realm of academic discussion than objective reality, as millions of people stubbornly refused to conform to the “decline of religion” paradigm.

Researchers in the field of new Islamic movements talk about the emergence of religious subcultures as the foundation of a lifestyle motivated by a certain religious ethos (Riesebrodt 2004: 27). Following James W. Jones, we might say that the mingling of religion and politics in religiously motivated terrorism (and not only in jihadism) is one of the foremost challenges of the 21st century. The divine master plan claimed by these subcultures and movements gives them the mandate to act against societies at large (Loblker 2012: 130).

As Jones expresses it: “The issues of national liberation, resisting domination, and economic justice are often intertwined with and sacralized by religious and spiritual motivations that cannot be ignored if contemporary terrorism is to be understood” (Jones 2008: 28). In other words: switching from religious language advocating violence to violent action depends on recoding conflicts in a religious language enabling the believers to perceive themselves as threatened by satanic forces, by apocalyptic powers, by Babylon, etc., and thus legitimizing violent resistance and changing the way these conflicts will go on. It depends

on specific situations, but religious language and symbolism advocating violence is necessary for the process of recoding (Kippenberg 2010; cf. Lohlker 2012: 131).

Coding or recoding conflicts in terms of religion leads to the practical logic (Bourdieu) of the actors thinking and acting in religious terms, even if this may occur in the most superficial forms thereof. To claim that the true cause or motivation for their actions is political, economic, psychological, criminal and so forth privileges academic-theoretical epistemology while ignoring the practical logic of religious actors themselves. To the extent that governments and civil society wish to intervene in the process of “violent radicalization” and thereby prevent acts of

terror, it is necessary to assess the share and form (ie, role) of religion in each individual case, in order to determine the most effective means of intervention. This requires careful analysis of, and response to, religious elements, as is obvious from the Arabic text of IS propaganda embedded in the image below:

*We will create supporters within your homes.
We will turn your sons into mujahidin.
We will raise them according to the Sunna of
the Prophet Muhammad, the trustworthy.
We will revive in their hearts,
honor, moral elevation, pride.*

This illustration is a hybrid using a visual language that is easy to understand: the threat



to parents; the reference to military jihad (in the context of IS, the most important religious duty); the reference to the *Sunna* (example) of the Prophet Muhammad, which serves as the religious foundation of IS; and the psychological element of reclaiming honor and moral superiority vis-à-vis one's enemies, and thus overcoming feelings of inferiority (Lohlker 2016c). Eliminating religious references from this illustration, or any analysis thereof, by ignoring their existence, would neuter its effectiveness for IS recruitment purposes, and render it impossible for Western analysts to grasp the profound emotional and psychological power of IS propaganda and, hence, the precise nature of its threat.



TELEGRAM (ACCESSED DECEMBER 2, 2015)

The text in the above illustration reads:

O, God! This religion is Your religion, and we are Your warriors. We fight in Your path. O God! Our victory depends upon Your grace, favor and kindness. Their polytheism will not defeat our monotheism. Our disobedience will not vanquish their unbelief. O, God! Forgive us our sins. We seek Your forgiveness and turn to You in repentance. We believe in You and trust in You. Do not blame us for what the shameless are making of us. Bless, o God,

our Prophet Muhammad, his family and his companions. Our final prayer is that all praise may be for God alone, Lord of all the worlds.

This text is deeply imbued with religious emotion and hostility toward everyone who is outside “the community of believers.” The message conveyed by the text—whose concluding prayer is derived from al-Fatihah, the very first chapter of the Qur’an, known to all Muslims—is reinforced by visual elements: one fighter stands guard while another presumably reads the Qur’an, with the Islamic State flag dominating the landscape. Again, we see violence and religion closely interwoven, for the combination of ‘warrior–Islamic scholar’ has become an integral part of IS iconography, as may be seen from the following illustration as well:



TELEGRAM (ACCESSED NOVEMBER 29, 2015)

We may cite many examples in which conflict has been recoded in religious language and symbols (Kippenberg), without saying which came first: religion or conflict. In the present case, we may assume that the practical logic of *jihadi* actors allows for just one code: religious violence.

This (re-)coding may be very simple:



"You will not enjoy peace unless and until we ourselves truly live in peace, in the lands of Muslims."

The above example shows a contextualization of the November 2015 terrorist attacks in Paris, with bombings conducted by French airplanes in Syria appearing in the bottom-left corner. The text and images are intended to evoke antagonism between Muslims and non-Muslims, employing religion as a "code" to interpret what IS perceives and depicts as a conflict between two states.

One simple fact needs to be emphasized at this point, in order to avoid a misconception that often results from the innate human

tendency to think in terms of antitheses. Acknowledging and even stressing the importance of religion to contemporary jihadism does not imply that religion is the sole reason for the existence of jihadism, or any other form of religiously motivated terrorism. Jihadism is, in fact, a multi-determined, multi-factorial phenomenon. The misconception referenced above leads many otherwise rational people, including Western policy makers, analysts, scholars and journalists, to deny the importance of religion in contemporary jihadism.

Misconceptions regarding jihadi Islam

In a recent book, "Der Dschihad und der Nihilismus des Westens" ("Jihad and the

Nihilism of the West,” Manemann 2016), we read that relating Islam to jihadism means to assume a causality between religion and violence and, especially, between Islam and violence (ibid.: 20). Shortly thereafter, the author acknowledges that Islam does in fact contain a set of symbols and ideas that are at times employed to legitimize violent conflict (ibid.: 21). The author then turns to his counterargument, by referencing the undeniable fact that for some Europeans who have become jihadists, religion was not the central element in the process of their radicalization and inducement to commit violence.

Specifically, Manemann is referring to several widely publicized cases that demonstrate that the jihadists in question may indeed have had only a superficial knowledge of Islam. This leads Manemann to erroneously conclude that IS-Islam cannot be the cause of these Europeans’ radicalization.

This often-voiced opinion ignores the fact that certain parts of the Internet have been heavily impregnated by jihadi propaganda, which does not consist of detailed theoretical-theological discourse, but rather assumes the form of a highly compact, religious symbol- and slogan-waving (IS-Islam) Islam, which facilitates the verbal and visual articulation of diverse grievances, while mobilizing opposition to those perceived to be responsible. IS propaganda sharply condemns the double standards of “Western” politics; the persecution of Muslims; the history of conflict between Islam and the West, ranging from the Crusades and colonialism to present-

day bombings in Iraq and Syria that result in civilian casualties; systematic discrimination against Muslims (defined as a group targeted for religious reasons); and the creation of an ideal state based on (IS-Islam) Islam. This propaganda is embedded within a larger structure that intertwines with theological doctrine, religious motivations and individual, social and broader political feelings of malaise (Löwenthal 1990).

To claim that converts are acting in a manner that violates certain rules of Islam – with Islam itself portrayed as a noncontradictory system of thought – implicitly argues that only a religiously “well-educated” and “sufficiently knowledgeable” believer may be legitimately regarded as a representative of his or her faith. Such lines of discourse also imply that a recent convert cannot be termed a “true” believer. Certainly we are exaggerating the arguments in question. Yet, this exaggeration may serve to highlight the absurdity of such modes of reasoning. Setting benchmarks for accepting or viewing any given individual as a religious believer – and expecting believers to act in accordance with one specific mode of normative behavior – would consequently exclude the majority of religious believers throughout history.

The basic assumption made by those who deny jihadists’ religious motivation, or legitimacy, is that religion itself cannot be complex, ambiguous or contradictory, which is in fact a quite modern idea (cf. Bauer 2011, Ahmed 2016). The author does not state that Islam has no role in jihadism, but would prefer to argue against monocausal

explanations of radicalization (Manemann 2016: 28). The author, however, does not offer a solution regarding how to approach the (in)compatibility of his claims: “Religion plays no role” and “religions play a role.” We would expect him to answer the question, “Which role?”

This conceptual unease is born out of a demarcation vis-à-vis other intellectual positions regarding jihadi Islam, which are characterized by different types of misconception, although they do display awareness of the importance of religion to jihadism. The first misconception is displayed by authors such as Graeme Wood (2015), who vigorously asserts that the barbaric variety of Islam practiced by the Islamic State is “medieval.” In fact, IS-Islam is a modern variety of religion, which emerges from and is an integral part of the dark side of modernity itself. And yet it is, in fact, a profoundly religious variety. To construct a distinction between an evil, brutal and thus inherently “medieval” religion, which, by definition, cannot be modern and enlightened, is to subscribe to the widespread normative misconception of modernity as a homogenous and altogether positive force. Yet the past two centuries bear witness to innumerable cruelties that were based upon, and the product of, modern rationality. Even the concept of enlightenment is much more problematic and difficult to understand than the, at best, naïve defenders of the term “enlightenment” may imagine. “Dialectic of Enlightenment,” by Theodor W. Adorno and Max Horkheimer, seems to have been forgotten.

A second misconception (Wood 2015) is that IS represents an attempt to reconstitute the age and circumstances of the earliest Muslim community. Close scrutiny of the Arabic-language material produced by the Islamic State demonstrates that it is consciously

To date, Western knowledge of the bulk of jihadi discourse, more than 80 percent of which occurs in Arabic, remains rudimentary at best.

engaged in a kind of archeological excavation of the Islamic tradition, from which diverse religious artifacts it is constructing IS-Islam.

The one-sided arguments referenced above are rooted in a flawed approach to jihadism and IS. Their shortcomings are partially due to a heavy reliance upon the few IS materials available in English and other European languages. To date, Western knowledge of the bulk of jihadi discourse, more than 80 percent of which occurs in Arabic, remains rudimentary at best, with the source material itself largely inaccessible and unexplored.

Reading their lips

Turning to jihadi Arabic language resources, we may find, for example, a blog entitled *A'iddū!* (“Prepare yourself!”). This title refers to a Koranic imperative. The blog offers resources (primarily documents and videos) that enable jihadis to wage “the military jihad” at different levels. As such, it is predominantly a “jihadi military” blog.

The blog contains many files that provide detailed information regarding explosives, small arms, anti-tank weapons and intelligence operations, but also files that contain advice regarding the spiritual preparation of warriors. One file that discusses military tactics and the training of leaders also describes ‘Alī ibn Abi Tālib, the son-in-law of the Prophet Muhammad, and Abū Dharr, a prominent companion of the Prophet, as role models for cautious behavior. Another file that discusses security issues provides illustrations from the biography of the Prophet. We can even access a special file on this blog that is focused primarily upon military lessons derived from the biography of the Prophet, while among other files we encounter the story of Abū Mahjan al-Thaqafi, another companion of the Prophet, who is cited as an example for those who have committed great sins and feel they are consequently forbidden to wage military jihad – quite the contrary, for sure.

The selected texts and videos have been assembled from various sources, including older Al Qaeda files, Hamas, Free Syrian Army documents, translations of Sun Tzu into Arabic and even a translation of Israeli texts: a highly pragmatic selection indeed. And yet all of these technical military resources are explicitly embedded within a specific religious tradition that jihadis clearly regard as their own. In other words, the creators of this jihadi military blog regard their efforts as the natural, contemporary outgrowth of Islamic history and tradition. When reciting the *basmala* (“In the name of God, the Most Merciful, the Most Graceful”) and so forth, the authors of these

texts are not mindlessly employing a culturally determined phrase. Rather, they consciously subscribe to a religiously impregnated discursive formulation and a history of contemporary jihadism that dates back to the Afghan-Arab volunteers.

The IS caliph

The core of the IS identity consists of two elements: the caliphate and violence (Lohlker 2015 and 2016a). One of the prerequisites for proclaiming a caliphate is to have a leader who possesses the requisite qualifications to serve as caliph.

Leaving aside other elements of the theory of proclaiming a caliphate, we see that IS argues for Abu Bakr al-Baghdādī’s legitimacy as caliph by stating that he has proved to be a successful fighter, and that he is also a religious scholar who has authored several books. He fulfills another requirement for becoming caliph, due to having the appropriate genealogy. The following illustration published on an IS-affiliated channel on *Telegram*, traces al-Baghdādī’s genealogy to the Prophet Muhammad through his daughter Fātima.



A video

A recent video, “Night Arrows,” demonstrates how IS-Islam makes powerful references to religion, and appropriates the symbols and emotions associated with Muslim religiosity, in its propaganda material.

The video depicts a city at night and a minaret, which evokes the idea of the call to prayer. The setting of the video is thus contextualized: it takes place within a Muslim city, in which the mosque is the most important structure. The film cuts to a man slowly rising from his sleep, taking a candle and then proceeding to perform his ritual ablutions with water from a clay jug. Afterward, the man enters another room to pray. An audio file can be heard featuring the voice of Abu Musab al-Zarqāwī, the founding father of al-Tawhid wal Jihad, a precursor organization to IS. The audio file begins with a call for Muslims – adherents of jihadi Islam – to pray for those who fight on their behalf, in service to God and Islam.

Golden, sparkling light descends into the hands of the praying man, symbolizing the blessed character of al-Zarqāwī’s speech, which calls upon Muslims to pray for jihadi fighters, and this golden light becomes an integral part of the prayer. The candlelight slowly fades away to reveal a landscape with two birds flying at sunset. A voice in the background tells viewers that “the *Sunna*,” the obligatory example of the Prophet, must be followed as “established by God for his creatures,” and that this includes the struggle (jihad) against oppressors. Once again, what may at first glance appear to be a political statement

is embedded within a profoundly moving religious context.

A following sequence contains a political statement, displaying video clips of Barack Obama, Vladimir Putin and Francois Hollande speaking. In the background, a voice talks about the necessity of retaliating against the West for its “war against Islam and Muslims.” The narrator continues to explain that the crimes of these aggressors are evident, and include the destruction caused by the anti-IS coalition’s bombing campaign. The next video sequence shows buildings in ruins, people trying to help severely injured victims (especially children) and an enraged elderly man calling upon the wrath of God.

The film cross-fades to images from the Paris attacks in November 2015, as the narrator continues to speak about retaliation, before fading once again to a sequence that shows fighters training for urban warfare. The narrator calls upon “those who arise in sincere belief to fight unbelief in the world” to take revenge for the Russians’ bombing (Putin’s image is shown) of “Muslims’ homes.” Such fighters, the speaker continues, prepare themselves for battle by trusting fully in God (armed IS fighters are shown parading in their vehicles), and their first and most vital weapon is “belief” (*īmān*). Viewers are told that these IS warriors are conscious of their previous sins and have repented.

The film proceeds to show Muslims at prayer, in order to emphasize once again that all aspects of life should be oriented toward God. Prayer, which is an integral expression of belief, is considered to be “the most important weapon.” While showing an old man praying

alone, followed by a boy and an old man praying together, a brief Koranic recitation concludes the segment of the video. A man appears and elaborates upon the virtue of prayer, and again we experience a cross-fade to a congregation of men praying. The narrator explains that these men are beseeching God to aid them against their enemies.

Another man appears speaking in Turkish. He calls upon Muslims, to whom he refers as “jihadis,” “to help the religion of God at least by praying.” The “help” requested translates to waging war against the enemies of God. The speaker is sitting in front of row after row of books written in Arabic. They appear to be religious literature, suggesting that the man is a knowledgeable scholar of Islam. Again, the congregation of praying men appears and a song may be heard describing “those who stand in unity,” which refers to Muslims – those who affirm the unity of God.

Another speaker tells viewers that the sky belongs to God, as does the earth, the rivers and the sea. Enormous mountains appear, along with beautiful forests and a waterfall. The film cross-fades to warplanes and the speaker tells viewers that God will ultimately destroy the aggressors’ high-tech weapons. This will be accomplished through the devotion of IS fighters, who are shown recovering the corpses of their comrades who have been slain in battle, suggesting that Islamic State warriors will fight to the death. Footage displays natural catastrophes that have occurred in the United States and the speaker proclaims that God will punish America through earthquakes and other disasters.

The video constitutes a true amalgamation of religious symbolism and ideas, which are visually manifest in the form of prayer and the film’s adept use of religious formulae. This allows for an identification of jihadis with Muslims in general: for the religious justification of a political agenda, and for persuading viewers that nature, and the Islamic State, are expressions of God’s omnipotent power. If one were to ignore the central role of religious symbolism and doctrine in the film it would be impossible to comprehend, or describe, the substance and emotional power of its message.

Anti-Shiism

Anti-Shiism is a paradigmatic element that illustrates the religious dimension of Sunni jihadism. Enmity against Shiites, who are often dehumanized and referred to as “filth” (eg, Lohlker 2016b), is embedded within a centuries-old discourse of marginalization and persecution that, in modern times, has been reinvented and disseminated throughout the world, with massive financial, logistical and political support from Saudi Arabia.

It may be tempting to interpret this sectarianism as a mere ideological disguise, meant to conceal the geopolitical interests at work (Saudi Arabia versus Iran, or IS versus Iran, for example).

However, we may better understand the nature of the current Sunni–Shite divide if we reconceptualize it as a political conflict that has succeeded in amalgamating centuries-old religious traditions, and strengthened

the bitter antagonism felt by both sides, by tapping into these religious lines of force.


Conclusion

In addition to the considerations already put forward in this essay, as evidence of the religious foundation of jihadism, we may add other elements of IS thought and the IS theology of violence (Lohlker 2015, 2016a), such as: the religious imperative to establish a caliphate based on violence; the prevailing apocalyptic mood; a thoroughly constructed set of gender rules based upon religious texts; the anti-smoking campaign waged by IS, on religious grounds; the internal structure of IS, which mirrors institutions mentioned in the history of Muslim communities; police/market control (*hisba*); social welfare (*zakāt*); and the introduction of a new currency called the gold dinar, similar to that used in the early days of Islam. All this provides ample evidence of the religious foundation of jihadism, and the manner in which jihadis envision their overall strategic aims.

As the anthropologist Scott Atran has written: “This is the purposeful plan of violence that Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, the Islamic State’s self-anointed Caliph, outlined in his call for “volcanoes of jihad”: to create a globe-spanning jihadi archipelago that will eventually unite to destroy the present world

and create a new-old world of universal justice and peace under the Prophet’s banner. A key tactic in this strategy is to inspire sympathizers abroad to violence: do what you can, with whatever you have, wherever you are, whenever possible ... While many in the West dismiss radical Islam as nihilistic, our work suggests something far more menacing: a profoundly alluring mission to change and save the world.”

That is why religion matters: it is the fuel that enables the jihadi machine of destruction to rumble forward. Cutting off the “supply of fuel” requires offering alternative conceptions of religion – and many other things. Religion matters, but it is not the sole solution to the threat posed by jihadism. Hard power may be required, but soft power (youth workers, teachers, community and family empowerment, etc) is also required. Political, social and economic conditions may provide the soil for the rise of jihadist entities, but religion – in fact, a specific construction of religion – is an integral part of the problem.

We need to help the people affected by this theology of violence, both victims and perpetrators. In order to help those attracted to jihadi Islam create another form of self-identity, we must remind ourselves of Eagleton’s remark back in 1991: “Only those interventions will work which make sense to the mystified subject itself.” 

DISCLAIMER: The original print and electronic versions of this article, published by Strategic Review, do not contain several ISIS propaganda images that appear on pages 97 – 99 and 102 of this PDF file. These images were originally selected by Dr. Lohlker to illustrate his scholarly analysis of jihadi Islam. LibForAll/IIQS—a founding partner of the Vienna Observatory for Applied Research on Terrorism and Extremism (VORTEX)—has reinserted these original images and Strategic Review is not responsible for their presence within this version of the article.