

## Understanding the Islamic State

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There has been a justifiable response of shock and bewilderment to the horrific images coming from the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria. Beyond these gruesome videos, there is a poor understanding about the Islamic State and its purpose, evidently even at the highest levels of western governments. This paper offers an overview of the Islamic State and its ideology.

To understand the Islamic State, formerly known as the Islamic State of Iraq and ash-Sham (ISIS), formerly known as about 12 other names, we start with a primer on Islam. Islamic countries operate in a completely different religious context compared to western countries. This context is worth reviewing, since the role of Islam in Arabic nations is not always well understood in western society. Islamic nations are, by definition, religious states. Put another way, not only do Islamic countries refrain from separating church from state, the country is the church, and the church is the country. In some religious states, the head of the country is also the leader of the religion.

### The country is the church and the church is the country.

Islamic states have a religious government, religious laws, religious courts, and religious police. Saudi Arabia, for example, declares Sunni Islam the official state religion, and the religious Sharia law prevails over the land. Non-Muslims are forbidden from becoming Saudi citizens. Non-Muslim foreigners are not allowed to visit Saudi Arabia except through a work visa – the country does not issue tourist visas<sup>1</sup>. Hajj visas are available to Muslims seeking the annual pilgrimage to Mecca.

The Saudi government neither protects nor recognizes any religion other than Islam. Any Muslim who converts to another religion, or who forsakes their Islamic religion, is guilty of apostasy, which was once punishable by death. Anyone who speaks out against the Sunni Islam doctrine commits blasphemy, which is still punishable by life imprisonment. The Saudi religious police, or Muttawa, strictly enforces Sharia law as interpreted by the Committee for the Promotion of Virtue and the Prevention of Vice. The Muttawa have extraordinary powers of arrest, detention, and summary punishment. Because they police religious affairs, the Muttawa enforce virtually every aspect of human activity, including socializing, companionship, lifestyle, sex, dress codes, diet, shopping, watching television shows and movies, etc.

The Muttawa do not require court approval to punish an offender – they are empowered to apply corrective action on the spot. One of the most controversial corrections occurred in 2002 when the Muttawa barred nearly 100 girls from escaping a burning school building because the girls were not wearing head scarves and they were not accompanied by male companions. 15 entrapped girls died and 50 more were injured. The ensuing formal investigation did not criticize the Muttawa's actions.

The Saudi Ministry of the Interior censors all media, and it takes this responsibility very seriously. All Internet, television, movie, and print media fall under the ministry's ever watchful

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<sup>1</sup> Saudi Arabia announced it would issue tourist visas in December 2013, but cancelled the program three months later.

eye. All internet traffic filters through a massive national censorship proxy server, which uses sophisticated software to ferret out unlawful communications. The Saudi Internet also blocks over 400,000 web sites, including Wikipedia and Google Translate.

Children growing up in an Islamic nation learn of the two houses of Islam that collectively describe the entire world. The House of Islam (Dar al-Islam) represents the nations in which Muslims can live and practice their religion in peace. By definition, Sharia law presides over the House of Islam.

The House of War (Dar al-Harab) refers to all non-Islamic countries, and describes the non-Muslim people of those nations as “unclean.” The Dar al-Harab commands every true Muslim to convert or kill unclean people. A third option available to Christian believers lets the unconverted live if they pay a tax, and solemnly declare themselves inferior subjects to their Islamic master and overlord. In Saudi Arabia, the House of War is more symbolic than a literal call to arms, but it provides a lens through which Saudis view the rest of the world.

### The religious police oversee and correct every aspect of behaviour.

Muslim children grow up reading, seeing, and hearing only what the government permits them to access. The religious police oversee and correct every aspect of behaviour. When it comes to adhering to the religious doctrines, Saudi Arabia leaves no part of a person’s life to chance.

As Islamic countries go, Saudi Arabia is a moderate state. They don’t actually kill and convert unclean people, because the Saudis need foreign doctors, engineers, geologists, business managers, and other professionals to build and operate the modern infrastructures the Saudis cannot manage alone. Saudis still dabble in the House of War by funding radical and terrorist factions. Saudi’s financial ties to the 9/11 attackers are well documented, and Saudi Arabia finances the Islamic State to wage a war of proxy against its regional enemies.

### The doctrine of the Islamic State is quite simple.

Which brings us to the Islamic State. The doctrine of the Islamic State is quite simple. First, all of the Islamic world shall be ruled under one person, called a caliph, in accordance to a ruthlessly strict, ultra-conservative seventh century Islamic doctrine, called Salafist-Jihadist. Second, each person on the planet shall either become a loyal Islamic State subject or shall die. Third, everyone who disagrees with Islamic State doctrine, including Islamic people, is guilty of apostasy, and shall die.

The Islamic State is different from other Muslim groups in several ways. First, it adopts a seventh century interpretation of Islamic doctrine centered around Wahhabism. Wahhabis follow what they believe to be the prevailing governing precepts in the time of Mohammed and his immediate followers. The Islamic State believes most people who call themselves Muslims are ‘Muslim in name only’, and that only the strictest interpretations of the most austere Islamic teachings are worthy of worship. Wahhabism is intolerant to any deviations of pure Sharia law. Indeed, Wahhabis themselves deplore the term Wahhabism, and prefer to consider themselves as the one and only true Islamic people – everyone else are heretics.

Not only does the Islamic State adopt this long forgotten interpretation of Islamic teaching, it embraces it with unrivaled zeal. Free of the conflicting compromises moderate Muslims constantly trade off, the Islamic State distills its uncluttered ideology into a single-minded theological steroid.

### The source of the Islamic State's brutality lies in the Islamic teachings and history.

Beheadings, slavery, crucifixion, and other forms of corrections were commonplace in medieval Islam, and were adopted by the prophet Mohammed. The source of the Islamic State's brutality lies in the Islamic teachings and history. While these practices are considered inappropriate by moderate Muslims, Islam cannot deny they exist in its history and religious verses.

Like Judaism, Islam is a religion of laws. The Quran offers instructions on how to eat, sleep, marry, and yes, how to behead infidels. The Quran specifically stipulates the religion of Allah shall dominate over all other religions. It also calls Muslims to fight non-believers. The Islamic State overlooks other parts of the Quran, like the one that forbids killing non-believers unless they initiate a war against Muslims. Any religious book of sufficient complexity, such as the Quran or the Bible, can be cherry picked to support virtually any position, as the Wahhabis did.

### Every individual within the region instantly falls under the Islamic State's strictest application of Sharia law without warning or mercy.

The Islamic State is also different from other Islamic groups in their blitzkrieg application of Sharia law. When a city or region succumbs to Islamic State forces, every individual within the region instantly falls under the Islamic State's strictest application of Sharia law without warning or mercy. Non-believers, including Muslims, are summarily executed without due process, often through barbaric means, such as beheading, slow drowning, explosive blasting, burning alive, crucifixion, exsanguination, and many other grotesquely imaginative ways. The Islamic State often records daily public executions and releases them in stylized videos to warn apostates of their impending fate. Younger women are typically taken as slave wives or sold in markets. The Islamic State does not see this approach as oppressive – quite the opposite – they view themselves as liberators of lost souls whom the Islamic State returns to the right and true path of Islam.

The Islamic State rejects peaceful resolutions as a matter of principle. It views murder, even genocide, not only as acceptable, but as the only legitimate means of fulfilling Allah's will. The Islamic State also believes in Islamic eschatology, meaning the Day of Judgement is near, resulting in the annihilation of all life, resurrection, and God's judgement. Killing as many non-believers as an Islamic State warrior can will elevate his esteem in this upcoming apocalyptic judgement.

### borders and peace treaties are irrelevant

The declaration of the caliphate is vital distinction between the Islamic State and the rest of the Muslim world. A caliphate is an Islamic government and place that is the center and authority for all Muslims worldwide. The caliph is the leader of the caliphate, and thus the leader of all

Muslims worldwide. While not at all similar, the caliph is the Islamic counterpart to the Catholic Pope, and the caliphate is the counterpart to Vatican City. The Islamic State declared the region it controls in Syria and northern Iraq a caliphate in 2014. Approximately eight million people live in this region. The Islamic State leader, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, is the Islamic State appointed caliph. Islamic State doctrine requires that, when a caliphate exists, it is every Muslim's duty to wage war to expand the global reach of the caliphate. By definition the caliphate does not honour international borders or durable peace treaties – borders and peace treaties are irrelevant when the caliphate is in a constant state of war to achieve global domination. None of the Islamic nations respect the Islamic State's claim over the caliphate. Al-Qaeda has similarly rejected the Islamic State's caliphate claim, provoking the Islamic State to declare every Islamic leader an apostate, thus calling for all their executions.

This fervent set of beliefs permeates every level of the Islamic State organization. Foot soldiers constantly recite quotations and proclaim their unyielding devotion to Allah. Leaders frequently quote seemingly arcane scriptures in their communications, proving their deep understanding of the hidden meanings of the verses that seem benign to non-believers.

The Islamic State occupies or is operating in Afghanistan, Algeria, Egypt, Iraq, Libya, Syria, Tunisia, and Yemen. Many find its uncluttered certitude and mission simplicity alluring in a complicated world. The cataclysmic nature of the Islamic State resonates with a cynical and disenfranchised youth.

### Many recruits express a wanting in their life

The Islamic State recruiters target young adults around the world, primarily through social media. They explain the purity and simplicity of the Islamic religion, and how the Islamic State is creating a homeland for all Muslims, but recruiters usually omit mention of any Jihad. Many recruits express a wanting in their life – a lack of belonging to a higher order. Often they perceive their own religion is in flux, leaving them uncertain about their relationship to both the religious organization and to God Himself.

As recruiters qualify prospective candidates, they express kindness and caring in their communications. Unlike the recruits' clergy, recruiters are always available – day and night. They answer theological questions quickly and sincerely, sharing their own joys and fears. A self-conscious person lacking in confidence might worry why her friend takes a day to reply to her text message, but Islamic State recruiters always reply to her messages promptly and thoughtfully. Recruiter messages seem genuine, spontaneous, often containing fat-finger or autocorrect typos, just like a real friend might do.

Recruiters answer western recruits' questions about Christianity skillfully and knowledgeably, with only a barely detectable level of manipulation. A Christian will not betray her God, but she might reserve judgement on an apostle or a prophet. One of the pivotal moments in western recruiting is to plant the seed of doubt that Jesus was in fact God, and might not he have merely been a prophet. They quote bible scriptures that support that assertion, and then ask the recruit to re-read the bible, and make the decision for herself. If the recruiter is successful in demoting Jesus to a prophet, or creates enough uncertainty in the holy trinity verses one God paradox, then the recruiter's job is finished, because the next step is to ask the recruit, well if Jesus was a prophet, and Mohammed was a prophet, and you already seem to identify with the Muslim teachings, then what are you waiting for?

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It is all laid out, step by step, in a manual written by al-Qaeda and adapted by the Islamic State, called “A Course in the Art of Recruiting”, a copy of which was seized by USA forces in Iraq in 2009. The manual emphasizes how to set up 7/24 recruiting teams to ensure you can spend as much on-line time as possible with each recruit, to never express disappointment or frustration at setbacks or stupid questions, and how pay attention to details so you always sound sincere. The manual also explains how important it is to reach out to recruits, don’t always let them come to you, so they consider you a true online friend.

Recruiting westerners serves two purposes. First it provides resources the Islamic State needs to continue its operations. According to the National Counterterrorism Center, the Islamic State has recruited over 20,000 foreigners into its ranks, with 3,400 of those coming from the west. Most westerners come from Europe, with only 130 from Canada (CSIS) and 180 from the USA (Director of National Intelligence). Second, recruiting from the west sends a haunting message to the family, community, and country of each recruit – we can reach anyone.

### Once recruited, there is only one way out.

Once recruited, there is only one way out. The Islamic State makes the Saudi religious police seem like tame girl scouts. Young teenager soldiers are indoctrinated in the Islamic State teachings when they are forced, at gunpoint, to kill non-believers, or themselves be killed. Recruits who demonstrate less promising prospects are soon selected for suicide missions.

A foreign aid worker stationed in Syria recently reported meeting four western teenage girls who realized the horrible mistake they had made when they joined the Islamic State. Fearful they were about to become slave wives, they desperately begged him to help them escape, but there was no help he could offer. Their passports and cell phones had been confiscated. As part of their arrival processing, they were forced to surrender all their social media passwords, which were then secretly changed while Islamic State operators scrutinized every last detail of their entire online lives. House guards and regular roadside checkpoints prevented any unauthorized movements. The four girls were never heard from again.

The current thinking is the Islamic State will eventually fizzle out, but not after a long and bloody struggle. The Islamic State controls several oil fields that translate into funding. Oddly, financiers in Saudi Arabia, Qatar, and Kuwait – mortal enemies of the Islamic State – have steadily funded the Islamic State out of a deathly fear of Iran’s growing influence in the Gulf region. As bad as an Islamic State dominated Iraq is, their thinking goes, it is far superior than to be neighbours to an Iraq annexed by Iran. Their financing also indirectly protects the Sunni Muslims from Shiite aggression, which is important to the Sunni Arab states.

### the Islamic State has no allies

Politically, the Islamic State has no allies in the Gulf region, and that is by design. It is, after all, sworn to kill or convert all non-believing Muslims in the region, thereby isolating itself from any would-be Arab friends. Similarly, the majority of the world’s Muslims oppose the Islamic State, as most prefer to live in a world with modern trappings. An excellent article by The Atlantic, [What ISIS Really Wants](#), suggests policy makers in the west do not understand the political dynamics of the region.

Defeating the Islamic State will require more than just galvanizing military and political support against the faction. The Gulf nations already oppose the Islamic State, but their fear of Iran

overshadows their concerns for the Islamic State. Iran is on the brink of becoming a nuclear power, and it has repeatedly pledged its intent to annihilate Israel and any other nations that oppose it. Should Iran attempt to fulfill that pledge, it would plunge the Gulf region into an unfathomable living nightmare that overshadows anything the Islamic State could inflict.

Even without nuclear weapons, should Iran annex Iraq during the power vacuum left behind by the failed USA occupation, international sanctions against Iran would have little effect. Iran, which is closely allied with Syria, would quickly rebuild the Iraq-Syria pipeline destroyed in the USA occupation, opening the Mediterranean ports to Iranian oil exports.

Iran has cultivated strong alliances within the Middle East, most notably with Lebanon, Iraq, Syria, and Yemen. With the support of this network, a combined Iran/Iraq nation could quickly supplant Saudi Arabia as the Middle East's power broker. Worse, from Saudi Arabia's perspective, Iran is predominately Shiite, whereas Saudi Arabia is mostly Sunni Muslim, and the two Muslim factions have trouble coexisting peacefully for very long.

Iran's aspirations for Iraq is not just idle speculation. Ali Younusi, advisor to Iran's Supreme Leader Khamenei, publicly announced Iran's continued interest in annexing Iraq only six months ago. This back story plays into the Islamic State's hands, as Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, and Qatar continue to fund the Islamic State in hopes of keeping Iran in check.

### History easily connects the dots between the USA's disastrous occupation of Iraq to the Islamic State's inception

It is unlikely a ground military intervention against the Islamic State will take place any time soon. History easily connects the dots between the USA's disastrous occupation of Iraq to the Islamic State's inception and success in the vacuum the USA left behind when it withdrew from a hollowed out Iraq. Even though the Islamic State is a "made-in-America" problem, the USA has no appetite for another military occupation in the same region.

The coalition aerial bombings have proven largely ineffective in defeating the Islamic State, but have possibly prevented the Islamic State from making significant expansion headway. Sustained coalition activity could possibly achieve an uneasy equilibrium that holds the Islamic State at its present general borders until the fervor within the Islamic State slowly fades. Whether that decline takes months, years, decades, or if ever, is anyone's guess.

In the meantime, western governments seem frozen in the headlights. They can't ignore the Islamic State, but neither do they have the stomach to meet it on its own military ground. Countries neighbouring Iraq and Syria are similarly paralyzed – they reject the Islamic State, but they dread the Iranian alternative. The west bombs the Islamic State from the safe distance of air strikes while the neighbouring Islamic countries support it financially. It is a surreal script that befits a Laurel and Hardy skit. Except no one thinks any part of this is funny.

*Editor's Note: This article was written and published on the day of the coordinated Paris terrorism attacks, including assaults on the Bataclan Concert Hall and the Stade de France. It was not known at the time of publication whether the Islamic State was responsible for those attacks.*