

Graeme Wood, “What ISIS Really Wants”

Intro

[Why should I listen to Graeme Wood?]

Gen. Nagata: We don’t understand the idea of ISIS. *[When did he say this?]*

Wood: ISIS’ rise to power is like that of **David Koresh** or **Jim Jones** – a charismatic leader who wields absolute power over people through the “realization of a dystopian alternate reality.”

This “alternate reality” is tied to a **belief in the apocalypse**. *Compare to*

- ☛ *Jewish apocalyptic eschatology*
- ☛ *Christian apocalyptic eschatology*

We have **misunderstood ISIS** in at least 2 ways, failing to see how it **differs from AQ**:

1. ISIS requires **(a) territory**, and **(b) a top-down structure**.
2. AQ is modern and secular; ISIS has a **medieval religious nature** and is committed to bringing about **the apocalypse**. *[Is AQ really modern and secular?]*

ISIS’s chief spokesman, **al-Adnani**, draws hateful pronouncements from Muslim theology. **ISIS is very Islamic.**

The central player in ISIS is **Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi**. *[Who is Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi? What’s the significance of his name? What does Abu Bakr have to do with the Yazidis and the Syrian Army?]*

I. Devotion

An ISIS infomercial video acknowledges **bin Laden** and **al-Zarqawi** (head of AQ-Iraq 2003-06). But it ignores al-Zarqawi’s less extreme teacher **al Maqdisi** (AQ’s intellectual architect) and **al-Zawahiri** (current head of AQ). Because al Maqdisi and Al-Zawahiri are not extreme enough, there is a **split between AQ and ISIS**. Both are Salafis. Issues center around differences between sinner and apostate. With ISIS’s expanded view of apostasy, all **200 million Shia are marked for death**.

Edward Said (Pal.-Am. 1935-2003): Muslims are not “ancient.” “When a masked executioner says *Allahu akbar* while *beheading an apostate*, sometimes he’s doing so for religious reasons.”

Bernard Haykel, of Princeton, “the leading expert on ISIS theology”: ISIS ranks are deeply infused with religious vigor. **ISIS has absolutely *not* distorted Islamic texts. Slavery, crucifixion and beheadings are part of the Islamic medieval tradition.** Wahhabis are radical, but not wanton in their violence. *Dabiq*, the ISIS magazine, addresses the issue of whether Yazidis are pagan or apostates. *[But see Think Progress article, re what Wood left out.]*

II. Territory

Peter R. Neumann, Kings College: ISIS uses internet extensively to recruit jihadis of both sexes.

Musa Cerantonio, Australian Muslim TV evangelist, “preacher of hate,” guides people to ISIS, yet blanches at beheadings and speaks out against suicide bombings; overjoyed at Baghdadi’s

declaration of Caliph; regards Ottoman caliphate as illegitimate because it didn't fully enforce Islamic law; regards a pledge to a valid caliph as essential to Islam.

To be the caliph, one must meet certain conditions:

- being a Muslim adult man of **Quraysh descent**;
- exhibiting moral probity and physical and mental integrity; and
- having *'amr*, or authority.

Jürgen Todenhöfer, German author, former judge and politician: ISIS still has a steady **inflow of foreigners**, ready to give up everything at home for a shot at paradise in the worst place on Earth.

Al Muhajiroun (3 ex-members of a banned London Islamist group): Without a caliphate, individual vigilantes are not obliged to amputate the hands of thieves they catch in the act. But **create a caliphate, and this law, along with a huge body of other jurisprudence, awakens.**

III. The apocalypse

Wood: ISIS, unlike other current jihadist movements, believes it is a central character in God's script. AQ acts like an underground political movement, but ISIS propaganda revolves around **the End of Days**. Bin Laden and Zawahiri are from elite Sunni families who look down on this kind of speculation. [*But is bin Laden like his family?*]

The Koran speaks numerous signs that will reveal that the apocalypse is nigh. [*See the Top 10.*] ISIS adds particularity to these apocalyptic events, e.g.,

- There will be only 12 legitimate caliphs, and **Baghdadi is the eighth**;
- The **armies of Rome** will mass to meet the armies of Islam in **northern Syria**.
- **Islam's final showdown with an anti-Messiah** will occur in **Jerusalem**.
- **Dabiq** will be Rome's Waterloo; **it will happen soon**; the armies will be **on horseback or carrying ancient weapons**. (ISIS has taken Dabiq and awaits the arrival of an enemy army there. Who "Rome" is...remains a matter of debate.)
- The anti-Messiah, Dajjal, will be cornered in Jerusalem. Just as Dajjal prepares to finish them off, Jesus will return to Earth, spear Dajjal, and lead the Muslims to victory.

IV. The fight

Al Muhajiroun: "**Offensive jihad**," the waging of war to expand the caliphate, is an essential duty of the caliph. ISIS follows policies of **mercy rather than brutality** – terrorizing its enemies in order to hasten victory and avoid prolonged conflict. For Muslims to accepting any border is *shirk*. So is sending an ambassador to the UN or hastening the arrival of a caliphate by democratic means. Some Islamist groups, incl. **Muslim Brotherhood** and **Hamas**, have committed such apostasies.

Wood: The U.S. and its allies have reacted to ISIS belatedly and in an apparent daze. "Our failure to appreciate the split ISIS/al-Qaeda split, and their essential differences between, has led to dangerous decisions. Ex: failed plans to save lives of **Peter Kassig** and **Allen Henning** required interaction between ISIS and al Qaeda. The decision to play matchmaker for America's two main terrorist antagonists reveals astonishingly poor judgment.

Wood: We are now meeting ISIS via Kurdish and Iraqi proxy on the battlefield, and with regular air assaults. Those strategies haven't dislodged the Islamic State from any of its major territorial possessions. **One way to un-cast ISIS's spell over its adherents would be to overpower it militarily and occupy the parts of Syria and Iraq now under caliphate rule. If ISIS loses its grip on its territory, it will cease to be a caliphate,** because territorial authority is a requirement. If ISIS musters at Dabiq in full force and is routed, it might never recover. Yet the risks of escalation are enormous. **Jihadists worldwide all believe that the U.S. wants to embark on a modern-day Crusade and kill Muslims.** Another invasion and occupation would confirm that suspicion and bolster recruitment. And consider the incompetence of our previous efforts as occupiers. Who knows the consequences of another botched job? Continuing to slowly bleed it, through air strikes and proxy warfare, appears the best of bad military options.

Wood: Neither Kurds nor Shia will ever gain control over Syria and Iraq. But they can keep ISIS from fulfilling its duty to expand. **With every month that it fails to expand, it resembles just another Middle Eastern government failing to bring prosperity to its people.** As more reports of misery within ISIS leak out, radical Islamist movements will be discredited, and ISIS will be its own undoing. But if it obtains al-Qaeda's allegiance, ISIS could become an even worse foe.

ISIS' threat to the U.S. is smaller than often suggested. **Al-Baghdadi** has said, "Deal with the Shia first, then with Sunni supporters of the Saudi monarchy, before the crusaders and their bases."

V. Dissuasion

Wood: Simply denouncing the Islamic State as un-Islamic can be counterproductive. Condemning slavery or crucifixion outright contradicts the Koran and the example of the Prophet. **Bernard Haykel** says, "That really would be an act of apostasy." **Cerantonio** and **Al Muhajiroun** speak with academic precision. I even enjoyed their company. ISIS supporters know how to react to Muslims who ignore parts of the Koran: with *takfir* and ridicule.

Al-Baghdadi is Salafi, but most Salafis are not jihadists, and most reject ISIS. They are committed to expanding the land of Islam, but not in the near future. Their first priority is personal purification and religious observance, and they believe anything that thwarts those goals is forbidden.

In Philadelphia, Salafi imam **Breton Pocius**: "My main goal is to encourage a *halal* life for worshipers in my mosque. When ISIS talks of social upheaval, they sound like Che Guevara. ISIS is not my *khalifa*. The worst possible condition for all people is chaos, especially within the Muslim community. The correct attitude for Salafis is not to sow discord by factionalizing and declaring fellow Muslims apostates."

Wood: Pocius, like most Salafis, believes that Muslims should remove themselves from politics. But they interpret the Koran's hatred of discord and chaos as requiring them to fall into line with just about any leader, including some manifestly sinful ones. But that need not mean direct allegiance to a caliph, and certainly not to Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi. It can mean, more broadly,

allegiance to a religious social contract and commitment to a society of Muslims, whether ruled by a caliph or not.

Pocius: Muslims should direct their energies toward perfecting their personal life, including prayer, ritual, and hygiene. Through this observance, God will favor them with strength and numbers, and perhaps a caliphate will arise. At that moment, Muslims will take vengeance and, yes, achieve glorious victory at Dabiq. A caliphate cannot come into being in a righteous way except through the unmistakable will of God. The *khilafa* is something that Allah is going to establish, and it will involve a consensus of scholars from Mecca and Medina. That is not what happened. ISIS came out of nowhere.

Wood: *Quietist* Salafism offers an Islamic antidote to Baghdadi-style jihadism. Those whose main motivation is to find an ultraconservative, uncompromising version of Islam have an alternative here. But western officials would probably do best to refrain from weighing in on matters of Islamic theological debate altogether. Barack Obama drifted into *takfiri* waters when he claimed that the Islamic State was “not Islamic” Most Muslims appreciated Obama’s sentiment, but others have only had their suspicions confirmed: the United States lies about religion to serve its purposes.

George Orwell confessed that he had “never been able to dislike Hitler”; something about the man projected an underdog quality.” The Islamic State’s partisans have much the same allure. “Fascism, Orwell continued, “is psychologically far sounder than any hedonistic conception of life.” We ought not to underrate the emotional appeal of “I offer you struggle, danger, and death,…” Nor, in the case of ISIS, its religious or intellectual appeal.

Wood: ISIS is ready to cheer its own near-obliteration. Ideological tools may convince some potential converts that the group’s message is false, and military tools can limit its horrors. But for an organization as impervious to persuasion as ISIS, few measures short of these will matter,

The war may be a long one.

[What solution(s) does Wood propose?]

[What does ISIS want?]