

A Theology of Atrocities: the Role of the Caliphate in the Islamic State's Crimes Against Iraqi Citizens

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The recent territorial defeat of the terrorist organization known as the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) necessitates a rigorous inspection of what motivated and structured the group's activities, particularly its tendency to commit mass atrocities against inhabitants of areas local to the group's operations. Some scholars have identified ISIL's adherence to ultra-conservative Islamist theology as the cause of this tendency, while others have credited it to ISIL's identity as both a regime and a terrorist organization. Rothrock affirms the former, yet contends that scholars who hold theology responsible are too general in their claims; rather than blaming ultra-conservative Islamism as a whole, Rothrock proposes that the Islamic State's implementation of specifically the theology of the new caliphate is the primary factor in its perpetration of atrocities against local, specifically Iraqi, citizens. Once ISIL's motivations are fully understood, the international community will be capable of anticipating and countering the attacks of terror organizations with similar ideologies and tendencies, making a comprehensive investigation of ISIL's rationale critical to global security.

AT THE TIME OF THIS writing, the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) is on the brink of territorial defeat. The group's territory, previously spanning vast areas of Syria and Iraq, has been reduced to the single Syrian town of Baghouz, which is currently under siege by the U.S.-backed Syrian Democratic Forces (Reuters). The end of ISIL's regime invites scholars around the world to attempt to understand what drove the group to terrorize Iraqi civilians, in the interest of providing the international community with the necessary information to preemptively identify and destroy groups that display similar tendencies to ISIL before they commit atrocities. Ahmed Hashim of Nanyang Technological University notes in *Middle East Policy* that the current leader of ISIL, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, formulated the group's strategy based on lessons learned from Al Qaeda's failures, leading to a focus on local savagery in Muslim countries (75). Characterizing ISIL and Al Qaeda for the United States Military, sociologist Paul Kamolnick cites four factors that distinguished ISIL from Al Qaeda, including "a belief in the necessity of immediately reestablishing the Islamic Caliphate" (53). Although scholars such as Hashim and Kamolnick have proposed many potential reasons for ISIL's genocidal tendencies, they have yet to satisfactorily acknowledge the degree to which ISIL's caliphate theology affected the group's activities. In contrast to Kamolnick's claim, the Islamic State's implementation of its theology of the new caliphate is not only a contributing factor to its variance from Al Qaeda, but the primary factor in its perpetration of atrocities against local civilians that Al Qaeda generally avoided. This paper will demonstrate the primacy of caliphate theology in motivating ISIL's activities by contrasting ISIL's theology of the

new caliphate with Al Qaeda's, in order to examine ISIL's divergence from traditional Islamist terrorist organizations and thus better understand ISIL as its own entity.

A decided lack of consensus exists in the scholarly community regarding what causes the perpetration of terroristic atrocities, and scholars have identified a vast array of possible sources as the defining cause. For example, Christopher Dean, Associate Fellow of the British Psychological Society, claims that terroristic behavior is a product of misplaced social or individual identity. Terrorist groups and individuals commit violent acts because they identify themselves as superior to their victims, or because of over-identification, which occurs when individuals solely identify with only one, in this case extremist, facet of their lives (283). Badi Hasisi and Ami Pedahzur of Israel's University of Haifa support the relative deprivation theory, which claims that when certain groups feel entitled to a specific level of economic well-being, but do not achieve that level, these groups eventually blame the political establishment for this divergence. These groups then express their dissatisfaction by committing acts of terroristic violence; thus, economic and political factors are the primary cause of terrorism (68).

The diversity of these studies demonstrates that there is not a conclusive answer to the question of what causes terrorist atrocities: the true cause is probably a mix of political, sociological and economic factors. Thus, because of this issue's complexity, to claim that terrorists commit atrocities due to a single cause would be an oversimplification; instead, scholars must examine the extent to which one factor, among many, influences terrorist behavior. Accordingly, one can hold the influence of a single factor

to be of greater magnitude than other factors without denying their potential validity. Although the theories of Dean and Hasasi and Pedahzur undoubtedly contributed to ISIL's behavior, they are not the primary reason for ISIL's atrocities.

Although ISIL differed from Al Qaeda in its implementation of caliphate theology, both groups held the establishment of the caliphate as a primary goal, which fundamentally influenced their operations. The caliph is the direct, authoritative successor of Muhammad, the spiritual and material head of Islam; the caliphate is a physical land under the caliph's rule where Islamic law is upheld and the Islamic world lives together, unified into a single state. In his analysis of the geographical implications of the rhetoric produced by the group's leaders, Joseph Hobbs, professor of geology at the University of Missouri, discovered that Al Qaeda envisioned the caliphate "as both a historic and a future entity, both a geographical one (occupying a vast empire) and political one (ruled by rightly guided caliphs). [Osama] Bin Laden has spoken frequently of [Al Qaeda's] goal of reestablishing the caliphate" (311). In other words, Al Qaeda prioritized the creation of a geographical space ruled by a divinely inspired caliph. ISIL's fixation on this same concept is more commonly known because in June of 2014, the group declared its conquered territory in Iraq and Syria to be the new caliphate, with Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi as the new caliph (Bradley). In ISIL's official magazine, *Dabiq*, the group declared that it had achieved its own version of Al Qaeda's vision, with a geographical territory under a caliph who promised to restore justice to the worldwide Islamic community (6). Accordingly, it is clear that both ISIL and Al Qaeda desired to establish the new caliphate.

Yet, although they both sought the caliphate, ISIL and Al Qaeda had two extremely different methods of implementing it. As Kamolnick examines in depth, this difference in implementation is because ISIL adhered to, and Al Qaeda diverged from, the variant, ultra-conservative strain of Islamic theology known as Wahhabism (10-11). Wahhabism originated in the 18th century, and gained notoriety because of its extreme emphasis on public confession of absolute faith in Allah. Wahhabism grounded this absolute faith in the uncompromising belief that Allah was the only true God; thus, adherents of Wahhabism regarded all those who did not believe in Allah as enemies, guilty of blasphemy. Moreover, these adherents regarded all those who did believe in Allah, yet deviated from Wahhabism's strict definition of monotheism, as internal enemies to the Islamic faith, blasphemers within the midst of the faithful

who the faithful must root out and destroy (6-8).

Kamolnick claims that followers of Wahhabism saw such internal enemies as the ultimate danger to Islam:

For followers of al-Wahhab... the genuine, abiding, and eternally greatest threat is this internal enemy, this nearest enemy. At best, it is the one who claims Islam, but who is either a pretender (the hypocrite), or an innovator (*bida*) (the heretic). At worst, it is a Muslim apostate (*murtadd*) who willfully, with complete knowledge, publicly disavows essential tenets of [monotheism] as conceptualized by al-Wahhab and, if unrepentant, is guilty of Islam's greatest sin: apostasy (*ridda*). (10)

Kamolnick goes on to explain that Al Qaeda's leadership largely rejected Wahhabism because it promoted violence against fellow Muslims, a step Al Qaeda was largely unwilling to take at that point (20-21). Instead, Al Qaeda would focus on attacking Islam's external enemies until it could turn its attention to the internal (27,28). ISIL's early leadership, however, adhered to Wahhabism, which, more than any other factor, distinguished ISIL from Al Qaeda and fostered ISIL's obsession with exterminating those they deemed to be apostates (72). Thus, Al Qaeda and ISIL differed in their implementation of the new caliphate because they decided to attack different targets based on their acceptance or rejection of Wahhabism, Al Qaeda targeting what it perceived as Islam's external enemies, ISIL targeting the internal.

Accordingly, Al Qaeda attacked targets in the West to liberate Muslim lands from foreign, primarily American, occupation (29). It would accomplish this by attacking the United States to the point of provoking, as Kamolnick states, "a state of economic exhaustion and ultimate collapse" (32). Presumably, this collapse would force the United States to end its involvement in the Middle East. Hobbs relates Kamolnick's claim to Al Qaeda's goal of establishing the new caliphate when he states, "In a substantial body of rhetoric... [Al Qaeda] has fashioned an explicit geographical rationale and goal for its campaign: to drive American and allied interests from Muslim lands and to effectively establish a new caliphate in them" (322). Clearly, Al Qaeda was interested in attacking the United States for the purpose of creating the new caliphate in liberated Muslim lands.

In contrast, although ISIL received major publicity for its international crimes, such as the November 2015 Paris attacks, ISIL conducted the majority of its attacks against residents of areas within or local to the boundaries of the group's caliphate. Statistics from the Global Terrorism

Database reveal that between May of 2013 and December of 2017, ISIL, not including the activity of the many affiliated groups around the globe that have pledged allegiance to ISIL's agenda, conducted 2,196 attacks against private citizens in Iraq (Pie chart of ISIL). From September of 2001 to December of 2017, Al Qaeda and all affiliated groups conducted only 242 such attacks in the entire world (Pie Chart of Al-Qaida). Miriam Müller's interpretation of a statement given by ISIL's caliph, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, helps to explain the reason for ISIL's myriad attacks. Upon announcing the establishment of the new caliphate, al-Baghdadi gave this speech: "So, rush Muslims and gather around your [caliph], so that you may return as you once were for ages, kings of the earth, and knights of war. . . O soldiers of the Islamic State, Allah (the Exalted) ordered us with [holy war] and. . . we announced the [Caliphate] in compliance with the order of Allah" (qtd. in Müller). Müller, a professor of Political Theory at Leuphana University, interprets this speech with the statement, "Fierce battles' and acts of violence in general are presented as the only feasible way to realize the [caliphate] depicted as both Allah's will and promise" (452). In other words, according to Müller, ISIL believed that in order to obtain the caliphate in its most perfect version, violence was necessary. This justification of violence in the name of establishing the caliphate, paired with ISIL's adherence to Wahhabism, explains the Global Terrorism Database's record of ISIL's numerous attacks in Iraq: ISIL sought to establish the caliphate through violence directed primarily against the internal enemies of Islam, or those people it deemed to be heretics who lived in close proximity to the caliphate. The reports of three of ISIL's atrocities, despite revealing only a fraction of ISIL's crimes against Iraqi innocents and civilians, make this clear in two respects.

To briefly summarize the reports before explaining what they reveal, after storming the town of Hit, Iraq, home to a tribe of Sunni Muslims called the Albu Nimr, ISIL murdered 322 captive Albu Nimr men, women and children in a series of executions in late October and early November of 2014 (Sadik and Almasry). In August of 2014, ISIL conquered the town of Sinjar, Iraq, displacing thousands of a minority group called the Yazidis; dozens of elderly and juvenile Yazidis died of exposure as a result, and ISIL killed an additional 500 Yazidi men (Smith-Spark). In May and June of 2017, ISIL massacred at least 231 civilians attempting to flee from violence in the ISIL stronghold of Mosul, Iraq, which it conquered in 2014 (Elwazer and Masters).

Firstly, these reports display that ISIL conquered local territory. This is clearly attributable to the group's theology

of the caliphate because ISIL declared its territory to be the new caliphate (Bradley), implying that ISIL conquered territory for that very purpose. Furthermore, conquering the surrounding regions was a logical application of ISIL's goal of establishing the caliphate through targeting the internal enemy, because, as previously mentioned, ISIL could better apply the principles of Wahhabism by rooting out local heretics and dissidents if it assumed a governmental status over them. Moreover, the reports clearly illustrate that ISIL's conquest of Iraqi villages is what caused ISIL to commit atrocities against the inhabitants; note that in each report, ISIL committed mass murder against civilians residing in the group's own territory. Such mass murder was only made possible because ISIL took possession of the town, displaced some residents and killed others on a whim, such as the Albu Nimr families. Obviously such behaviour is historically typical of conquerors, yet ISIL would not have been motivated to conquer if not for the group's caliphate theology. A useful contrast to ISIL in this respect is Al Qaeda: as previously discussed, Al Qaeda, although it once held the title as the world's premier Islamist terror organization, was disinterested in conquering local villages to establish the caliphate because it was not primarily concerned with Islam's internal enemies (Kamolnick 27,28). This illustrates that conquering local villages is not an activity inherent to Islamist terrorism, and, if it is occurring, must be caused by a distinctive quality in the perpetrators. The distinctive quality in ISIL is its application of Wahhabism to its establishment of the caliphate. Thus, conquering local territory in the name of the caliphate precipitated ISIL to wage war against its perceived enemies, the local Iraqi population.

Secondly, ISIL's theology of the new caliphate exacerbated the violent behavior typical of conquerors by necessitating the use of violence in the caliphate's establishment, as previously demonstrated by Müller's analysis of al-Baghdadi's speech. This, too, can be credited directly to ISIL's specific theology of the caliphate, because many caliphate theologies are fundamentally peaceful in nature, such as the one suggested by Vernie Liebl, Middle East Desk Officer in the United States Marine Corps' Center for Advanced Operational Culture Learning, in *Middle Eastern Studies* (387-388). Liebl proposes that a new caliph could be selected from the lineage of historical caliphs, rather than self-appointed through conquest, stating, "there exists now in the Muslim world legitimate caliphal bloodlines; organizational and economic foundations; and potentially legal authority to restore the caliphate today. All that is needed is the will" (388). Accordingly, ISIL's specific approach to the

caliphate, rather than caliphate theology in general, necessitated and encouraged violence against the Iraqi population. In these two respects, the reports demonstrate that ISIL's theology of the caliphate was the primary motivation for the group's atrocities against Iraqi citizens.

Although up to this point his analysis was critical to properly exposit ISIL's theology of the caliphate, at this point Kamolnick raises a deeply flawed objection to the assertion that ISIL's caliphate theology was primarily responsible for the group's atrocities. He claims that crediting caliphate theology as the motivating factor behind ISIL's perpetration, and Al Qaeda's avoidance, of atrocities against Iraqis is inaccurate, because the theological and ideological differences between the groups are not limited to varying implementations of the caliphate, but encompass the majority of the concepts of Wahhabism. These concepts include the absolute condemnation of accepting help, even basic necessities, from the occupiers of Muslim lands, the total denunciation of Christians and Jews despite their shared religious history with Muslims, and the severe suppression of women (91-93). In other words, the acceptance of Wahhabism, not caliphate theology, is the driving force behind ISIL's variance from Al Qaeda. Kamolnick grants that a key doctrine of ISIL's brand of Wahhabism is a focus on the caliphate, yet he depicts this not as the primary, but one of the many, driving forces of the group's perpetration of these sorts of atrocities (53-54). So, is Kamolnick correct in stating that ISIL's perpetration of atrocities was due to the entirety of the group's religious paradigm, rather than just the theology of the caliphate?

To properly answer this question, Kamolnick must be acknowledged for the insightfulness of his claims. He is correct in asserting that the fundamental differences distinguishing ISIL and Al Qaeda are far more complex and extensive than just the groups' caliphate theology. Yet Kamolnick's central claim that ISIL's obsession with Wahhabism motivated the group's atrocities against innocents in Iraq misses the point. ISIL's brand of terrorist atrocities against local citizens might appear to be due to the doctrines of Wahhabism, but in practical terms, these atrocities were entirely enabled and motivated by ISIL's theology of, and identity as, the caliphate. Müller, examining ISIL's function as both a regime and a terrorist group, concurs with this assessment by referencing Haroro Ingram, a senior research fellow with George Washington University's Program on Extremism, stating,

"The proclamation of the caliphate and the creation of organizational structures in the areas controlled by [ISIL] are the key elements of a narrative (Ingram, 2016) that legitimates its violent actions against its declared enemies and direct adversaries outside these areas, but also internally against its own 'populace'" (445).

In other words, ISIL used its governmental status to justify attacking the people living within the group's conquered territory in the name of the new caliphate. Müller is detailing the momentous importance of the caliphate to ISIL's perpetration of atrocities against local civilians, something Kamolnick critically underestimates; ISIL's atrocities were enabled by, and committed in the name of, the caliphate. Once again, Kamolnick is partially correct: Wahhabism and religious fundamentalism did significantly influence ISIL's implementation of the caliphate. Once ISIL established a regime, the group forcibly imposed Wahhabism upon the inhabitants of its caliphate, exhibited through violent acts against people ISIL deemed to be heretics. Yet, despite Wahhabism's indisputable influence on ISIL, the caliphate encompassed Wahhabism, allowing it to be expressed; Wahhabism did not encompass the caliphate. Thus, Kamolnick is incorrect.

To conclude, the primary reason that ISIL was motivated and enabled to perpetrate atrocities against Iraqi citizens, something Al Qaeda predominantly avoided, was ISIL's incorporation and implementation of the fundamentalist doctrine of Wahhabism in its theology of the new caliphate. If the world's governments want to end the suffering of innocents at the hands of terrorist organizations, they must understand the motivation and operation of such organizations in order to prevent and thwart the perpetration of future atrocities. Understanding how group's similar to ISIL justify atrocities with the theology of the new caliphate is a critical component in this effort. Multiple Islamist terrorist groups around the globe have pledged allegiance to the Islamic State, such as The Islamic State in West Africa, formerly known as Boko Haram, and the Ansar al-Sharia; as affiliates of ISIL, they share ISIL's extreme ideologies of implementing the caliphate. Accordingly, researchers should continue to investigate how theology and ideology affect the behavior of terrorists, particularly regarding the Islamic State; Müller and Kamolnick have initiated this conversation, and it should be pursued for the sake of the victims of ISIL's atrocities, until theologies and ideologies that inspire atrocities can be identified and countered before violence occurs.

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