



ISIS and its Historical Context

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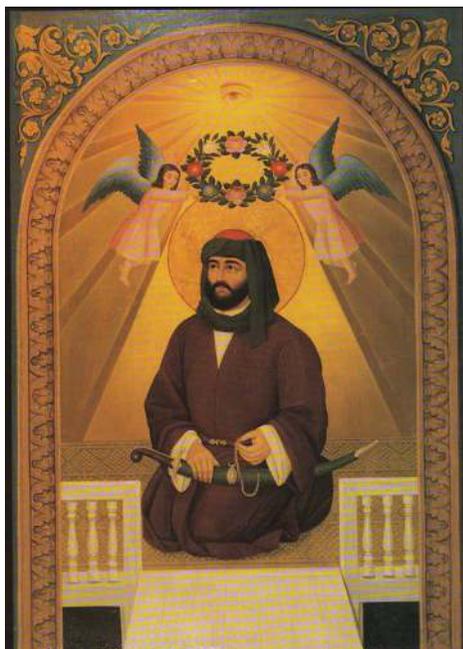
In recent months, the horrifying spectacles associated with the rise of ISIS have been seared into the consciousness of the Western world. In a manner freakish to most Westerners, the organization has continually publicized its own brutality, with professionally produced videos and slick periodicals in Western languages bragging of beheadings, crucifixions, and the enslavement of young girls. Somehow, despite the visceral disgust that the group inspires, despite its demonstrated ability to carry out terror attacks on Western soil, despite declarations from virtually every world power and every Middle Eastern government that it needs to be destroyed, and despite the occasional local setback, ISIS continues to expand its global reach and to tighten its control over swaths of Iraq and Syria. In a bizarre paradox that the Western media struggle to explain coherently, the group has exploited complex political realities in order to carve out a niche for itself; these realities include the multifaceted Syrian civil war, the perceived sectarianism of the Iraqi government, the broader political and religious rivalries among Middle Eastern regimes, the alienation of young Muslims living in the West, and the global rivalry between Russia and NATO. Bizarrely, the organization's long list of enemies has served as a source of its staying power: most of its powerful opponents have been too preoccupied with outmaneuvering one another to collaborate effectively in the destruction of their common foe.



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Thus, while ISIS is regarded with hostility by Middle Eastern regimes and Western governments alike, it has continued in its efforts to recruit foreign fighters, sell oil, purchase weapons, and plan attacks. It claims to have established on earth a regime that reflects God's heavenly will: a state not only ruled in accordance with Islamic law, but also governed by the legitimate successor of the Prophet Muhammad. All the while, a debate has raged in Western media and political circles over the merits of ISIS's claim to represent the true face of Islam. Unfortunately, the very way in which this debate has been framed is rooted in Westerners' radical ignorance of Islamic history and theology. One sees, for example, politicians and commentators on the political left arguing that ISIS cannot be called Islamic in any sense; they cite passages in the Qur'an and *hadith* literature (compendia of the Prophet Muhammad's oral teaching) that paint Islam as a religion of tolerance and peace, as well as the testimony of Islamic authorities, such as the *ulama* of Al-Azhar University in Egypt, who have condemned ISIS for violating Islam's core ethics.

Some of those on the political right have taken the opposite position, arguing that ISIS represents the real, unalloyed, malign face of Islam; they tend to bring favorite proof texts to the table, such as Qur'an 2:191-194: "Slay them wherever you find them. Idolatry is more grievous than bloodshed. . . . Fight against them until idolatry is no more and God's religion reigns supreme." Both sides of the argument tend to treat Islamic scriptures and core texts in a way that is alien to the Islamic interpretive tradition—for Muslims, the Qur'an is an object of devotion



Ali ibn Abi Talib, whose claims to be Muhammad's successor touched off the first Islamic civil war in 656-661.

first and foremost, not a discursive text that can be understood or commented on by someone lacking the requisite years of linguistic and theological training. Yet there is a deeper problem with this sort of debate, in that it tends to ignore what is truly unique about ISIS, and the one thing that distinguishes it from other, superficially similar, Islamist movements: the claim to have reestablished the caliphate here on earth.

In classical Arabic, the word *caliph* simply means "successor," and the notion that authority over the whole Islamic community ought to be exercised by the caliph—the successor to the Prophet Muhammad—was unquestioned in the early days of Islam. The only question was the principle on which the successorship ought to be based, and this question gave rise to the oldest and most bitter sectarian division in Islamic history—the division between Shi'ite Islam and the rest of the *ummah*, or Islamic community. The origins of the debate are murky,



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and have to be reconstructed from later partisan sources, but it seems to have been part of a broader conflict in the immediate aftermath of Muhammad's death, on the extent to which the new faith of the Arabs ought to alter their social structures and tribal customs. According to the traditional narrative, the Prophet Muhammad received his first revelation in AD 610, and fled in 622 from Mecca to Medina, where he became a political and military leader as well as a preacher of monotheism. By the time of his death in 632, Muhammad had led armies successfully across Arabia, regained control of Mecca, and forced the various tribes of the peninsula to submit to his scepter, to the worship of the one God, and to a detailed system of religious laws. Islam was thus, in its foundations, a political and military phenomenon as well as a religion, and the death of its prophet touched off a bitter debate between those who felt that he should be succeeded by a tribal elder, chosen in the traditional manner, and those who strongly believed that because Islam had changed things so radically, the Prophet's own adopted son, Ali ibn Abi Talib, was his only valid successor as leader of the community. The former faction initially won out, however, as the elders Abu Bakr (632-634) and Umar (634-644) became the first two caliphs. They led the tribes of Arabia, newly united under the banners of Islam, on a spectacular and unprecedented march of conquest. By the death of the caliph Umar, the Islamic empire had come to embrace huge swaths of Byzantine and Persian territory,

stretching from Iran to Libya. The caliphate was clearly functioning as a powerful unifying institution, able to direct

affairs far from its home base in the Arabian Hijaz. In the midst of continued military success, however, the controversy over the succession was beginning to boil over: Umar's immediate successor, Uthman, was assassinated in 656. This act of violence paved the way for Muhammad's own adopted son, Ali, to accede to the caliphal throne, and simultaneously touched off a great civil war.

The war was inevitable, because Uthman's clan, the Banu Umayya, refused to allow his death to go unavenged. They led a rebellion against Ali that grew into the first *fitna*, or first Islamic civil war (656-661). Understanding the various factions involved in the civil war can be very difficult: at the risk of oversimplification, it pitted Ali and the partisans of the exclusive rights of the Prophet's family (these partisans became known as the "Shi'a" or "faction") against the Umayyad clan, who sought to avenge Uthman. The Umayyads were led by Mu'awiyah, a veteran general and the governor of Syria, a rich province freshly conquered from the Byzantines. All the while a third faction, known as the Kharijites or Khawarij, observed events with interest, believing that God would decide the issue on the battlefield. The Kharijites held a radical view of the caliphate, believing not only that the caliph ought to be the most pious Muslim, but that Muslims were obliged to rebel against occupants of the throne who did not meet the

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Kharijites' strict standards of religiosity. Thus, when Ali agreed in principle to settle his dispute with Mu'awiyah through arbitration, instead of seeking a decisive outcome on the field of battle, the Kharijites swung into action, launching a brutal terrorist campaign against both sides. The Kharijites have always been remembered with horror within the Islamic tradition; they violated all accepted conventions of warfare, sparing neither age nor sex. They assassinated Ali, but failed to kill Mu'awiyah before they were suppressed, thus allowing the Umayyad family to gain control of the Islamic empire and reign as caliphs until 750. Meanwhile, the march of conquest continued; by the end of the Umayyad period (661-750) the caliphate stretched from the Pyrenees to Central Asia.

The outcome of the first *fitna* thus involved both the death of Ali and the rise of a dynasty that his partisans (and others) regarded as illegitimate in its claim to the title of "caliph." The political implications were as obvious as the religious ones: Ali's partisans, who became known as Shi'ites, accepted the leadership of his descendants, whom they regarded as dispossessed rulers, sources of esoteric wisdom, and true successors to the Prophet. Many early Shi'ite leaders died as martyrs, cementing their place in Shi'ite devotional memory and sharpening the division between the Shi'ites and the rest of the

Muslim community. Thus, even as Shi'ism remained politically quiescent for much of the Umayyad period, the religious traditions and political outlook of the Shi'ites began to diverge from those of the majority, who accepted the rule of the Umayyad caliphs as the will of God. When the Umayyads were discredited and overthrown in AD 750, in the complex and fascinating event known as the Abbasid Revolution, Shi'ites initially hoped that "their" caliph would at last be acknowledged. In this they were disappointed, as the Abbasid clan (related to the Prophet's family, but not directly descended from Ali) claimed the caliphate, and moved the capital of the Islamic world from Damascus to the new city of Baghdad. Under the rule of the Abbasids of Baghdad, the synthesis known to us as "Sunni" Islam first clearly took shape and won the adherence of the vast majority of Muslims. Sunni Islam gradually became an orthodoxy defined by the consensus of scholars (*ulama*), rather than by the will of the caliph; in fact, *ulama* were often successful in resisting the Abbasid caliphs on key doctrinal matters. Thus, although there is no central teaching magisterium within Sunni Islam, there is a traditional body of legal and religious thought that commands the adherence of Sunni scholars and believers. Sunni *ulama*, down to the present day, are curators of this tradition, and they debate religious and legal questions within its boundaries.

Meanwhile, the Abbasid caliphate endured severe political setbacks after its ninth-century golden age came to a close. While retaining their position as religious figureheads to whom most of the Islamic world paid lip service, the Abbasid caliphs were eclipsed politically and militarily by the leaders of the Turks, who had migrated into the Islamic world as nomads during the ninth century, found service as warriors, and by the early tenth century had undeniably subverted the political authority of the Abbasid state.

The Islamic world was therefore politically fragmented for much of the Middle Ages, a patchwork of rival emirates under a figurehead caliph, instead of the united empire it had once been. In this environment, it is no accident that the caliphate itself became disputed among rival claimants: a branch of the Umayyad family that had taken up residence in Spain reasserted its claim to the title “caliph” in 929, while a Shi’ite dynasty, claiming descent from Ali, established a kingdom known as the Fatimid Caliphate in North Africa (by the eleventh century the Fatimids also ruled Sicily, Egypt, and Palestine). These competing claims to the caliphal title were mutually exclusive—there can be only one successor to the Prophet—and centuries of multiple claimants to the title ultimately destroyed the ability of the caliphate to serve as a unifying force in the Islamic world. One by one, the various caliphal dynasties fell: the Umayyads of Cordoba in 1031 (owing to internal problems), the Fatimids in 1171 (deposed by the armies of Saladin, who despised Shi’ites), and the

Abbasids in 1258 (as Baghdad was conquered by the Mongols). The caliphal title did not fall completely into abeyance, but instead it became something that a powerful warlord or chief might claim for himself. The fierce Almohad rulers of North Africa claimed to be caliphs, as did the Ottoman Sultans of Turkey. As the Ottomans built their vast Eastern Mediterranean empire in the Early Modern period, the stage was set for certain dramatic transformations in the very nature of Islamic politics and law.

For Westerners who find Islam to be enigmatic at best and frightening at worst, it may be helpful to explain what one means by “Islamic law.” To put it simply, for Muslims the “law” is nothing more or less than the totality of God’s commandments for one’s life. It is all-encompassing. In medieval Islam, therefore, rules and regulations governing prayer, fasting, ritual purification, and diet were as much part of the “law” as regulations governing marriage, family life, and criminal offences. The law prescribed certain highly detailed ritual obligations just as surely as it proscribed adultery and theft. As with the Israelites of Moses’ day, the law covered everything; one does not find the sorts of distinctions between “legal” and “religious” obligations to which modern Westerners are accustomed. The Ottoman Sultans were thus in a position to exercise enormous influence on the practice of the Islamic faith. They accomplished this by becoming great patrons and sponsors of religious scholarship; over the centuries, Ottoman patronage transformed the Sunni

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ulama from an independent and often fractious body of religious thinkers into an official organ of the state. Sunni orthodoxy was therefore largely defined in terms that were acceptable to the Ottoman ruling elite. By the sixteenth century, the Ottomans ruled over a sprawling multiethnic empire that embraced southeastern Europe, Asia Minor, Syria, Palestine, Egypt, and Arabia, and it thus makes sense that they favored a version of Sunni Islam that contained a heavy dose of pragmatism (e.g. rebellion against rulers was forbidden, traditional popular practices such as Sufi mysticism and the veneration of Islamic saints were permitted, etc.). These pragmatic measures left a powerful stamp on the practice of Islam in the Eastern Mediterranean; Ottoman *ulama* functioned there, for centuries, as the final authority on religious questions. The Ottoman *ulama*, however, were state employees and were doomed to disappear with the fall of the empire, leaving behind a vacuum of religious authority that other movements would compete to fill—often with shocking consequences.

This downfall of the Ottoman state was not a single event, but a painful, drawn-out process; by the beginning of the nineteenth century it was abundantly clear that the Sultans' feeble, ramshackle, half-modernized realm could no longer compete with the muscular empires of Britain, France, and Russia. As Muslim religious thinkers became aware of their world's political and military weakness, they began to interpret it as a sign of God's displeasure. Thus, despite the Sultanate's surviving into the twentieth century together with its caliphal pretensions, the credibility of the Ottoman religious synthesis had already taken a

massive hit by 1818, when the Sultans felt obliged to conduct a military campaign against Arabian adherents of a newfangled Sunni religious movement known to us as Wahhabism. Wahhabism matured and grew during the nineteenth century; it portrayed itself as a return to the pure religion of the Prophet and his companions, and defined itself in opposition to the religion of the Ottoman *ulama*. Wahhabi-influenced Muslims sought explanations for the decline of the Islamic world, which had once been far superior to the West economically and militarily; they tended to blame the turning of the tables on God's wrath at the prevalence of "un-Islamic" practices. Mysticism and the veneration of tombs were therefore denounced. More alarmingly, as Middle Eastern Muslims were faced with unprecedented political setbacks during the twentieth century, Wahhabi-inspired movements mounted a powerful challenge to the various Western-aligned Arab regimes, denouncing pragmatic rulers in Egypt, Syria, and Iraq as sellouts, and calling for a return to a system of Islamic governance guided by the exemplary conditions of the seventh-century caliphate.

The various Wahhabi-aligned movements were unmoored from their own organic religious tradition, which had perished with the Ottomans, but they had a powerful argument on their side: for Muslims, the all-encompassing law was revealed by God, while the Western-style law codes that had become common in the Middle East were merely the work of men. Because the Ottoman Empire and the various early twentieth-century Arab regimes, with their Westernized criminal and family law codes, were derogating from

divinely revealed law, the rulers could be designated as apostates or infidels. Organizations like the Muslim Brotherhood, founded in the early twentieth century amidst the final collapse of the Ottoman state, had deep roots in this milieu that combined disenchantment with the Ottoman religious synthesis with frustration at European dominance in the Middle East and a desire for a return to the pure religion and law of the seventh century. They tended to be fiercely anti-colonial and pragmatic in their own way, adopting secular tactics of organization, protest, and political agitation. Their intellectual inspiration came from diverse figures including Rashid Rida, Hassan al-Banna, and Sayyid Qutb, who mixed a heady cocktail of ideas that blended vigorous Islamic revivalism with notions that seem, on the face of things, to be utterly alien to the mainstream of the Islamic religious tradition—justifications for rebelling against rulers, for example, or even the radical notion that jihad is a religious duty incumbent upon every individual Muslim (at least in times when the rulers of the Islamic community are themselves sellouts to Western interests). Later twentieth-century movements like Hamas and al-Qaeda are further outgrowths from this same set of innovations in the fabric of Islamic thought. ISIS, although fruit from the same tree, is distinguished by the idea that has allowed them to appeal in a unique way to alienated Muslims in Europe and all over the globe: the reestablishment of the caliphate, to which all Muslims theoretically owe allegiance. For disaffected, disenchanting young Muslims from Paris to Los Angeles to Jakarta, there was now a banner to which they could rally.

It was thus a long and tortuous string of causes that led us from

the early twentieth-century fragmentation of Islamic religious consensus to the horrors of twenty-first-century Islamic terrorism. The vacuum of religious authority that resulted from the collapse of the Ottoman state, along with the serious challenges presented by the rise of the modern world, created the conditions for a reimagining of Islamic political and moral theology. Organizations like ISIS and al-Qaeda have deep ideological roots in earlier twentieth-century movements that were engaged in just such an enterprise of reimagination. For the United States and Europe—as well as virtually every Middle Eastern government, whose very existence is an implicit denial of ISIS’s claims to embody the caliphate—dealing effectively with ISIS will require more than just coordinated military might. It will require confronting deep contradictions and anxieties woven into the fabric of modern Islam, and whether anyone in East or West is up to the task remains to be seen. **P**

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