INSIGHTS INTO THE IDEOLOGICAL CORE AND POLITICAL PILLARS OF ISIS

Vladimir Sazonov, Illimar Ploom

■

1. Introduction

This article[1] focuses specifically on the ideological core[2] of ISIS[3] and strives to explain it by showing that ISIS's ideological core is rooted not merely in

---

[1]   The authors partially rely on content published in earlier articles by Sazonov, e.g. **Mölder, H., Sazonov, V**. 2019. The Development of Intercultural Dialogue in the Middle East: Contemporary Ideological-Religious Conflicts and their Historical Roots. – Sazonov, V.; Mölder, H.; Espak, P. (eds.). Cultural Crossroads in the Middle East – Historical, Cultural and Political Legacy of Intercultural Dialogue and Conflict from Ancient Near East to Present Days. Tartu: University of Tartu Press, pp. 10–35. [**Mölder, Sazonov** 2019]; **Sazonov, V**. 2014b. Outbreaks of Islamism in Iraq – the Rebirth of the Caliphate? – Diplomaatia, September 22. https://icds.ee/outbreaks-of-islamism-in-iraqthe-rebirth-of-the-caliphate/ (9.12.2019). [**Sazonov** 2014b]

[2]   **Fadel, M**. 2019. Ideas, Ideology, and the Roots of the Islamic State. – Critical Review. A Journal of Politics and Society, Vol. 31(1), pp. 83–94; **Bunzel, C**. 2015. From Paper State to Caliphate: The Ideology of the Islamic State. – The Brookings Project on U.S. Relations with the Islamic World. Analysis paper, No. 19, March. https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2016/06/The-ideology-of-the-Islamic-State.pdf (12.12.2019). [**Bunzel** 2015]

[3]   ISIS (Islamic State of Iraq and Syria) or ISIL (Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant) or Daesh (its Arabic-language acronym) is a radical and an extremist Salafist and Jihadist movement whose founder is considered to be Jordanian Abu Musad al-Zarqawi (1966–2006). It is known that al-Zarqawi founded the movement in 2006, a few years after the 2003 invasion of Iraq by Western coalition forces. Initially the movement was called the Islamic State of Iraq (October 2006 – April 2013), and later renamed as the Islamic State of Iraq and Sham (April 2013 – June 2014), and the Islamic State (June 2014 – present) (**Bunzel** 2015, p. 3). Bunzel has highlighted that "founded by al-Qaeda in Iraq, the Islamic State emerged at a time when Iraq's Sunni insurgency was fast losing momentum. It is significant that al-Qaeda was involved in founding the movement, while it was later joined by several large and small Islamist groups, such as Islamic Jihad" (**Bunzel** 2015, p. 5). The first leader of the Islamic State of Iraq was Abu Omar al-Baghdadi, who was assassinated in 2010. The last known leader of ISIS was Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, killed in 2019. For more on ISIS, see also **Burke, J.** 2015. The New Threat from Islamic Militancy. London: The Bodley Head.

extreme Islamist views, such as radical Salafism and Jihadism[4] or specifically Salafi Jihadism[5] and Wahhabism, but they have also borrowed from certain elements of Arab nationalism. What is more, they have managed to skilfully design effective online information campaigns targeting different audiences. Finally, it must be borne in mind that there are also certain political facets in Islamic fundamentalism that cannot be overlooked. Those political facets, in turn, come with the inter-cultural historical dimension, whereby the changes within an specific religion should be seen in the context of wider cultural and socio-political changes and pressures.

The authors do not aim to conduct an 'anatomic' dissection of the ideological foundation of ISIS, instead the aim of this article to give a brief overview of certain central ideological elements and political pillars of ISIS. To that end, the authors analysed primary sources (e.g. the ISIS propaganda film "Flames of War"[6] that relies heavily on religious narratives) as well as current literature on radical Jihadism and ISIS's ideological base.

In today's Middle East, dangerous extremist forces are becoming increasingly visible (especially after the Arab spring[7] and with the escalating politics of chaos in the region[8]) and more powerful – especially Islamist[9] religious fanatics and terrorists[10], such as the more radical branches of Salafism.[11]

---

4   **Kepel, G**. 2006. Jihad: The Trail of Political Islam. London: I. B. Tauris.

5   Salafi jihadism is a religious-political ideology, which is based on ideas of "physical" jihadism and the Salafi ideological base and pillars. The term "Salafist jihadist" was used by G. Kepel in 2002 with the aim of describing the hybrid nature of radical Islamist ideology that originated with international Islamist fighters and jihadists during the Soviet-Afghanistan war as the jihad waged against Soviet invasion. (**Livesey, B**. 2019. The Salafist Movements. Frontline. https://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/shows/front/special/sala.html (11.11.2019)). [**Livesey** 2019]

6   **ISIS Releases Propaganda Video: Flames of War**. 2014. – The Rubin Report, September 17. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jAoH0Xr5a8c (11.12.2019). [**ISIS Releases Propaganda Video: Flames of War** 2014]

7   **Danahar, P**. 2014. The Middle East. The World after the Arab Spring. London-New Delhi-New York-Sydney: Bloomsbury.

8   **Roy, O**. 2008. The Politics of Chaos in the Middle East. New York: Columbia University Press.

9   For more on Islamism, e.g. **Martin, R. C.; Barzegar, A**. (eds.) 2010. Islamism, Contested Perspectives on Political Islam. Stanford University Press. Stanford, California.

10   **Hübsch, H**. 2001. Fanatische Krieger im Namen Allahs: die Wurzeln des islamischen Terrors. Die Deutsche Bibliothek. München: Heinrich Hugendubel Verlag.

11   For more see: **Mölder, Sazonov** 2019.

Several of these religious extremist groups[12] are very active in the Middle East and even in the West. This is especially true in Syria, a country enmeshed in a bloody civil war for the past eight years (since March 2011) and where in 2014, radical Islamists succeeded in establishing a terrorist quasi-state called "the Caliphate"[13] or the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS)[14] on the territories nominally belonging to Syria and Iraq. As Fraser *et al.* have stated:

> *At the beginning of 2013, an emergent Sunni group, known as the Islamic State of Iraq, began a series of attacks in the country, while in April, the formation of the Islamic State of Iraq and Levant (ISIL), drawing on support in both Iraq and Syria, was announced. Calling itself the Islamic State, in June the organisation declared the Caliphate.*[15]

By the end of 2019, ISIS had lost these previously controlled territories in Iraq and Syria. Nevertheless, although ISIS can be currently deemed mostly defeated from a military point of view, its ideological ideas, key leaders, and thousands of fighters sustain the threat of potential re-establishment of the Islamic State in the Middle East. Thus, ISIS as such has yet to truly be defeated.[16]

In addition, radical – and often also politically motivated – religious groups have become more and more visibly influential, especially by using information warfare.[17] R. Zgryziewicz has highlighted the following with regard to ISIS's information war tactics:

---

[12] **Rubin, B. M**. (ed.) 2009. Guide to Islamist Movements. New York, London: M. E. Sharpe, Amonk.

[13] The Caliphate was declared by the leaders of ISIS in June 2014 and the title of Caliph was given to their leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi (1971–2019), originally named Ibrahim Awad Ibrahim al-Badri.

[14] **Bunzel** 2015.

[15] **Fraser, T. G.; Mango, A.; McNamara, R**. 2017. Making the Modern Middle East. London: Gingko, p. 427.

[16] **Ianes, E**. 2019. ISIS has been waiting for this very moment as Trump-fueled chaos in Syria helps it regroup. – Business Insider, October 15. https://www.businessinsider.com/isis-could-regroup-amid-trump-fueled-chaos-in-syria-2019-10 (10.10.2019).

[17] **Zgryziewicz, R.; Grzyb, T.; Fahmy, Sh.; Shaheen J**. 2015. Daesh Information Campaign and its Influence. Results of the Study. Riga: NATO Strategic Communications Centre of Excellence. https://www.stratcomcoe.org/daesh-information-campaign-and-its-influence-1 (09.12.2019).

Visuals, words, and actions have been effectively used for shaping the infor-mation environment. Daesh has adopted the strategy of creating its own version of the symbols that internationally recognised countries use, i.e. the flag, anthem, emblems, and organizational structure. These are intrinsic to Daesh's communication strategy. The group advertises its good manage-ment practices, declarations of support from other organisations recognised within its community of support, as well as their operational successes. By highlighting its achievements and emphasizing its future plans, Daesh strives to inspire hope, excitement, and confidence in those people who are inclined to believe in them. To counter these 'legitimising narratives' it is important to observe how the group communicates, both internally and externally.[18]

In the past decades, religiously motivated fundamentalist[19] political move-ments and extremist terrorist organizations (e.g. ISIS, Al-Qaeda, etc.) have become extremely influential in the Middle East. They have even been able to change both the regional and global security environment, making it more unstable, dangerous and explosive. To that end, they often use religion and religious narratives, phenomena and ideas, as tools for influencing their target audiences and, of course, as an instrument for achieving their political and ideological aims.[20]

It must be borne in mind that in the Middle Eastern cultural space, reli-gion is still very closely intertwined with politics, just as it was in ancient times.[21] This enmeshment is prevalent to such an extent that they are often impossible to separate from one another. What is more, these theological systems can even be used by religious extremists to justify their crimes and violent[22] methods (e.g. warfare, terrorism, deportations, intolerance towards

---

[18]   **Zgryziewicz, R**. 2016. Daesh Strategic Communications. – Kudors, A., Pabriks, A. (eds.). The War in Syria: Lessons for the West. The Centre for East European Policy Studies. Rīga: University of Latvia Press, p. 106. https://www.cimic-coe.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/04/20160101_UC_The-War-in-Syria-Lessons-for-the-West.pdf (10.10.2019). [**Zgryziewicz** 2016]

[19]   **New, D. S**. 2002. Holy War. The Rise of Militant Christian, Jewish and Islamic Funda-mentalism. Jefferson, NC, London: McFarland & Company.

[20]   For more see: **Mölder, Sazonov** 2019, p. 14.

[21]   **Mölder, H; Sazonov, V**. 2016. Sõjateoloogia ilmingud Lähis-Idas Da'ishi näitel: kas reli-gioosne liikumine või poliitilis-sõjaline organisatsioon? – Sõjateadlane, nr 3, lk 208−231. [**Mölder, Sazonov** 2016].

[22]   **Selengut, C**. 2003. Sacred Fury: Understanding Religious Violence. Walnut Creek, CA: AltaMira Press.

other religious or ethnic groups), which they often utilise to achieve their political objectives.[23]

This begs the question: what is the underlying foundation of ISIS's programme in the radical religious-ideological context? In broad terms, it is the same as that of all Islamists – the Quran and the Sharia law are all-encompassing, conveying a holistic framework to make sense of the world.[24] However, it must be borne in mind that ISIS is also a Jihadist and fundamentalist radical Salafi[25] movement that idealises the early medieval Muslim world of Prophet Muhammad, and strives to return to the early days of Islamism as their official credo. Essentially, ISIS's ideology comprises several universal and skilfully compiled narratives. Some of them are borrowed from the early Islamic traditions, others from modern extremism, radical Salafism (Qutbism), Wahhabism, as well as Arab nationalism, while also drawing on successful practices of Western PR campaigns.[26]

Cole Bunzel, an American expert on Wahhabism, has analysed the ideology of ISIS by dividing its history into several clearly distinguishable periods or stages. According to Bunzel[27], the first stage was the genesis of the idea of ISIS "*in what is called the Zarqawi prelude (2002–2006), the period of jihadism's initial rise in Iraq under the leadership of Abu Musab al-Zarqawi (1966–2006)*". The second stage of ISIS's ideological development was the period of the Islamic State of Iraq (2006–2013), which Bunzel describes as "*a largely failed attempt at state formation coinciding with jihadism's decline in the country*". The next or third stage was the Islamic State of Iraq and Sham (2013–2014), "*which saw the much-delayed success of the Islamic State idea in the group's expansion to Syria. The fourth is that of the Islamic State as the outright Caliphate (2014–present)*".

What are ISIS's aims? ISIS wants to restore the Arab society to the early days of Islam, and as such, its main objective is to return to the roots of Islam, consequently rejecting all reforms and all innovation that have occurred within Islam and in Muslim religious customs and understandings. According to ISIS's views and understanding, all changes are bound to corrupt the original and pure nature of the Islam of Muhammad's era. Thus, their goal is to promote the Wahhabist ideological approach that aims to

---

[23] **Mölder, Sazonov** 2019, p. 14.

[24] **Mölder, Sazonov** 2016.

[25] Not all Salafists can be considered radical and violent.

[26] **Sazonov, V**. 2014b.

[27] **Bunzel** 2015, all subsequent quotes in this section from p. 5.

restore the Caliphate of the 7th century. ISIS's leaders believe that this new Caliphate should be governed in accordance with Salafist doctrine and Sharia law.[28] Of course this official vision needs to be corrected to reality, since no actual return is really feasible, and even the idea of choosing the purest form of Islam is itself primarily a political decision.

2. Salafism and Wahhabism as the Main Ideological Pillars of ISIS

What are Salafism and Wahhabism? The ultraconservative Sunni Muslims are known as Salafi and they idealize the person of the Prophet Muhammad and the first caliphs who lived in the 7th century. The official goal of the Salafi is to return to the roots and origins of Islam – to a society, to the concepts and values of the early 7th century. The term "Salafism" is defined as "*a school of thought which surfaced in the second half of the 19th century as a reaction to the spread of European ideas, seeking to expose the roots of modernity within Muslim civilization*".[29]

For ultraconservative Sunni Muslims, Prophet Muhammad's life and that of the first Caliphs, including all their words and deeds, constitute the fundamental basis for interpreting Islamic law and religious dogma. The ideologists of Salafi movements emphasize their desire to turn back the wheels of history, striving to establish a direct link with the life of Mohammad and his period. In this context, one of the most prevalent Salafi terms is *al-Wahhābiyya,* originated by Islamic preacher and a well-known scholar Muhammad ibn Abd al-Wahhab who was pressured by his opponents to denounce his teachings as mere personal opinion.[30] The scholar al-Wahhab and his followers called themselves *al-Muwaḥḥidūn,* meaning "those who profess the unity of God".[31] In the 20th century this term has been appropriated by the followers of the Salafi, for example Sulaymān bin Saḥmān.[32]

---

[28] **The ideology of the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant.** – Wikipedia. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ideology_of_the_Islamic_State_of_Iraq_and_the_Levant#cite_note-42 (12.12.2019).

[29] **Mölder, Sazonov** 2019, p. 21

[30] *Ibid.*

[31] **Pink, J**. 2010. Tradition and Ideology in Contemporary Sunnite Qurʾānic Exegesis: Qurʾānic Commentaries from the Arab World, Turkey and Indonesia and their Interpretation of Q 5:51. – Die Welt des Islams, Vol. 50(1), pp. 3–59.

[32] **Mölder, Sazonov** 2019, p. 21.

ISIS, which has tried to build its ideological foundation on Salafism and Wahhabism, is itself also a branch of Salafism, specifically a radical branch called Qutbism or Jihadist Salafism. However, Salafism itself, as a movement and ideology, does not automatically refer to radical Islamism or terrorist ideology. Owing to that, it should also be noted that as an ideology, Salafism does not constitute one uniform, extremist authority as has been depicted in the media after the 2001 terrorist attacks in New York and other terrorist acts in Madrid, Paris, Berlin and London, etc.[33]

Instead it is possible to distinguish between at least three to five distinct branches within the Salafi movement. First, there is the non-violent and peaceful Purist branch of Salafism, seeking to promote mainly religious goals, ideas and Islamic education. The second branch of Salafi movements is known as Madkhalist Salafism, which it is quite close to the Purists, mainly comprising the followers of Saudi Arabian Islamic scholar Rabee al-Madkhali[34]. The Madkhalist Salafi support secular state-building in the Arab world, claiming that secular leaders have been granted a divine right to rule their countries.[35]

The third Salafi branch is the most populous branch of the Salafi movement, usually referred to as mainstream Salafism or political Salafism. It condemns violence, but contrary to the Purist and Madkhalist branches, they are quite actively engaged in the political processes in their home countries and societies. Fourthly, the most infamous, but less popular branch of Salafism is Jihadism, a radical branch that is used by organizations such as ISIS and other Islamist terrorist organizations. This radical Salafi Jihadism has gathered strength, especially since the mid-1990s, using terrorism, sabotage, information war, cyber-attacks, violence, various means of hybrid warfare as their main instruments against secular regimes and governments, and also against non-Muslims, but also against Shia Muslims, who they consider apostates.[36]

---

[33] **Mölder, Sazonov** 2019, p. 21.

[34] Born in 1931 in Saudi Arabia, Rabee' Ibn Haadee 'Umayr al-Madkhalee is the head of the Sunnah Studies Department at the Islamic University of Madinah in Medina, Saudi Arabia. He is a famous Salafist scholar, and is considered to be the leader and founder of the Madkhali-Salafi movement.

[35] **Mölder, Sazonov** 2019, pp. 21–22.

[36] *Ibid.*

2.1. ISIS and Qutbism

As mentioned above, Salafism has many different branches and movements, including some more or less moderate or radical movements, with different degrees of politicisation, etc. One of its radical branches is called Qutbism, and it has served as a major influence on the ideological foundations of the al-Qaeda organization, as well as ISIS and others.

Qutbism was named after its founder Sayyid Qutb[37] (1906–1966), one of the leaders of the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt in the 1950-60s. As high-lighted by Kepel "*Qutb's early inspiration had come from the Brothers – but at the end of his life, he was able to draw conclusions from their failures as well as their successes, and to confront the new situation created by the disappearance of colonialism and the rise of an independent state that was hostile to Islamist ideals*".[38] According to Qutb, Islam is a comprehensive system of morality, law, and management, all governed by the principles of Sharia law. Qutb's main contribution to Islam is his 30-volume edition of commentaries to the Quran called "*In the Shade of the Qurʾān*". Originally known as a secular and progressive scholar, Qutb turned to fundamentalist Islamism in the course of his studies in the United States during the late 1940s. Interestingly, although Qutb welcomed the "Free Officers" movement led by Gamal Abdel Nasser and their coup to overthrow the ruling Egyptian king Farouk in 1952, he soon fell into deep conflict with the new rulers, ulti-mately spending ten years (1954–1964) in prison where he wrote his famous political manifesto of Islamism "*Milestones*" (*Ma'alim fi-l-Tariq*). Two years later, in 1966, Qutb was executed by hanging.[39]

Sayyid Qutb's younger brother Muhammad (1919–2014) was also a follower of Islamism and its ideological patterns, eventually moving to Saudi Arabia. He taught Islamic studies and his students included future radical terrorist al-Qaeda leaders such as Osama bin Laden and Ayman al-Zawahiri. It is worth mentioning that Muhammad Qutb's magnum opus "*Islam: The Misunderstood Religion*" (*Shubuhāt Hawla al-Islam*) is considered one of the foundational writings of the fundamentalist and radical path of Islamism that promotes Islamic moral superiority over the Western world as well as its ideas and values.[40]

---

[37] **Kepel, G**. 2002. Jihad. The Trail of Political Islam. Cambridge, Massachusetts: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, pp. 30–32. [**Kepel** 2002]

[38] *Ibid.*, p. 27.

[39] **Mölder, Sazonov** 2019, p. 22.

[40] *Ibid.*

Thus, in essence, ISIS draws heavily from the Qutbist branch of Salafism, using and promoting the ideas and views of such Islamist scholars and spokesmen as Sayyid Qutb, Abul A'la Maududi, Hassan al-Banna, etc. As described above, Qutbism is an extreme Islamist ideology "*that advocates violent jihad to establish governance according to sharia (Islamic law). It is believed to be the foundational ideology of today's most dangerous violent Islamist groups, including al-Qaeda and ISIS*".[41]

3. Jihadism as the Ideological Core of ISIS

We should begin by defining the term *jihad*[42], one of the many central and strong narratives that correspond to the mind-set of certain Muslims, especially those who are radicalised. According to Middle Eastern understandings, the term *jihad* (now mostly used to denote terrorism, radical Islamists or suicide attacks) is more or less equivalent to the Western concept of *ius ad bellum*, defining the circumstances of a just war. The famous Islamic scholar Ibn Khaldun (1322–1402) has discussed the terms of 'just' and 'unjust' wars in his major work *Muqaddimah* ("Introduction").[43]

Asma Afsaruddin, Professor of Arabic and Islamic studies, defines *Jihad* in the following manner:

> **Jihad**, (*Arabic: "struggle" or "effort"*) *also spelled* **jehad***, in Islam, a meritorious struggle or effort. The exact meaning of the term* jihad *depends on context; it has often been erroneously translated in the West as* 'holy war'. Jihad, *particularly in the religious and ethical realm, primarily refers to the human struggle to promote what is right and to prevent what is wrong. In the Qurʾān* jihad *is a term with multiple meanings. During the Meccan period (*c. *610–622 CE), when the Prophet Muhammad received revelations of the Qurʾān at Mecca, the emphasis was on the internal dimension of* jihad*, termed* ṣabr*, which refers to the practice of "patient forbearance" by Muslims in the face of life's vicissitudes and toward those who wish them harm. The Qurʾān also speaks of carrying out jihad by means of the Qurʾān against the pagan Meccans during the Meccan period (25:52), implying a verbal and discursive struggle against those who reject the message of*

---

[41] **Qutbism** (*sine anno*). – Counter Extremist Project. https://www.counterextremism.com/threat/qutbism (12.12.2019).

[42] **Kepel, G**. 2002. See more on jihad: **Peterson, Ü**. 2005. Džihaadi kontseptsiooni kujunemine Koraanis. Magistritöö, Tartu Ülikooli filosoofiateaduskond. Tartu: Tartu Ülikool.

[43] **Bahrani, Z**. 2008. Rituals of War. The Body of Violence in Mesopotamia. New York: Zone Books, p. 11; **Mölder, Sazonov** 2016, p. 223.

Islam. In the Medinan period (622–632), during which Muhammad received Qurʾānic revelations at Medina, a new dimension of jihad *emerged: fighting in self-defense against the aggression of the Meccan persecutors, termed* qitāl*. In the later literature – comprising Hadith, the record of the sayings and actions of the Prophet; mystical commentaries on the Qurʾān; and more general mystical and edifying writings – these two main dimensions of jihad,* ṣabr *and* qitāl*, were renamed* jihād al-nafs *(the internal, spiritual struggle against the lower self) and* jihād al-sayf *(the physical combat with the sword), respectively. They were also respectively called* al-jihād al-akbar *(the greater jihad) and* al-jihād al-asghar *(the lesser jihad).*[44]

Thus, Jihad[45] is a broad term and does not always denote violent deeds and holy war against non-Muslims. Secondly, embedded deep in the ideological foundation of ISIS is radical Salafi Jihadist ideology, itself, in turn, based on

the violent exploitation of Salafist tenets and the strict interpretation of Islamic law, which is manifest in Sharia. The ideologues of the Islamic State seek to govern every aspect of their follower's life and base their actions on dogmas of the Quran and Hadiths that are shaped according to their understanding.[46]

It has been argued that Salafi Jihadists have taken the most extreme passages from the Quran[47] and the Hadiths[48] to justify violent and radical actions, in essence, abusing Islam.[49] The jihadists call on their supporters to start a religious war and in this they rely on modern ideologists but also on the Quran. For example, the Quran (9:29–30) says:

The Jews say, "Ezra is the son of Allah"; and the Christians say, "The Messiah is the son of Allah." That is their statement from their mouths; they

---

[44] **Afsaruddin, A**. (*sine anno*). Jihad. – Encyclopaedia Britannica. https://www.britannica.com/topic/jihad (13.12.2019). [**Afsaruddin** *s. a.*]

[45] For more on jihad, see **Rashid, A**. 2002. Jihad. The Rise of Militant Islam in Central Asia. A World Policy Institute Book. New Haven & London: Yale University Press.

[46] **Mölder, Sazonov** 2016, p. 325.

[47] All quotes from the Quran used in this article are taken from **Holy Qur'an** 1993. Translated by M. H. Shakir. Qum, Islamic Republic of Iran: Ansariyan Publications P.O.B. 37185/187. [**Holy Qu'ran** 1993]

[48] **Бертон, Д**. 2006. Мусульманское предание: ввение в хадисоведение. Москва-Санкт-Петербург: Диля.

[49] **Williams, J**. 2015. How ISIS uses and abuses Islam. – Vox, November 18. https://www.vox.com/2015/11/18/9755478/isis-islam (11.12.2019).

imitate the saying of those who disbelieved [before them]. May Allah destroy them; how are they deluded?[50]

3.1. Salafi Jihadism

Salafi jihadism is a religious-political ideology which is based on the beliefs and ideas of jihadism and the ideological core of the Salafi movement. The term 'Salafist jihadist' was introduced by Gilles Kepel in 2002 with the aim of describing hybrid Islamist radical ideology which was developed in the 1980s by international Islamist fighters during the Soviet-Afghan War as jihad against the Soviet invasion.[51]

The ideology of the Islamic State propagated by ISIS, is based on Salafi jihadism, who consider jihad as its essential element. To illustrate their understanding of Jihad, the authors offer the following excerpt from a speech by one of the leaders of the Islamic State of Iraq, Abu Omar al-Baghdadi:

> *We believe that jihad in God's path is an individual obligation, from the fall of al-Andalus until the liberation of [all] Muslim lands, and [that it is an individual obligation] in the presence of a pious person or an impious person. And [we believe that] the greatest of sins after disbelief in God is barring from jihad in God's path at the time when it is an individual obligation. Ibn Hazm said: "No sin after disbelief in God is greater than the sin of forbidding jihad against the unbelievers and commanding the surrender of the Muslim's women to them on account of the sinfulness of a Muslim man whom others do not call to account for his sinfulness.*[52]

4. Fundamentalism as a Political Phenomenon

As indicated in the chapter on Salafism and Wahhabism, the Salafi ideology can be seen as a 19th century response to European influence on Islam. This idea deserves a more in-depth analysis as it provides an extra layer of backdrop for understanding the radical fundamentalist movements within Islam.

First of all, it would be expedient to outline in more detail the direct and indirect influence of European and Western culture on the emergence and development of Islamic fundamentalism and radicalism. The main pressures can be most explicitly seen in the form of European colonisation

---

[50] **Holy Qur'an** 1993.
[51] **Livesey** 2019.
[52] **Bunzel** 2015, pp. 39–40.

as the history of Western colonisation has hardly left any Muslim nation untouched.[53] While it is difficult to define Islamic fundamentalism as a straightforward response to the felt impacts of European pressure, this line of argument cannot be entirely cast aside either.[54]

Indeed, this article approaches Islamic radicalism partly as a response of a traditional culture in danger of losing its roots and, in order to revitalize them, turning to its sources with the aim of establishing a strict set of rules. This strictness is meant to provide a feeling of security and thus, radicalisation can be seen as a way of overcoming the inner insecurity of a community or a people. As such, fundamentalism could hardly be seen as a purely religious phenomenon. In essence, and in existential terms, it is much more political, seeking to condition individual thought and behaviour into following the 'right path' as prescribed by religious doctrine. Although nowadays, fundamentalism is primarily associated with Islam, it originally acquired its name from Christian fundamentalists in America where certain groups of immigrants felt endangered by the changing interpretation of the Bible[55], with particularly strong opposition emerging against the German hermeneutical school of Bible interpretation. However, it is possible to pinpoint even earlier examples of Christian fundamentalism, such as early modern Calvinist regimes in Switzerland (e.g. in Geneva, Basel and Zürich).[56]

In this context, the changes brought on by modernity could be said to have prompted a fundamentalist response which focused on the rules of the right way of life. While ostensibly focusing on Christian theology, its actual effect was the establishment a radical theocratic regime that issued strict

---

[53] **McDonnell, Th. M**. 2010. The West's Colonization of Muslim Land and the Rise of Islamic Fundamentalism. Chapter 1: The United States, International Law, and the Struggle against Terrorism. – DigitalCommons@Pace. Pace Law Faculty Publications. http://digitalcommons.pace.edu/lawfaculty/833/ (13.12.2019). For consequences of the post-colonial choices in Sudan which may have side-lined moderate Islamic schools, see: **Massoud, M. F**. 2018. How an Islamic State Rejected Islamic Law. – The American Journal of Comparative Law, Vol. 66, Issue 3, September, pp. 579–602. https://doi.org/10.1093/ajcl/avy036.

[54] **Emerson, M. O., Hartman, D**. 2006. The Rise of Religious Fundamentalism. – Annual Review of Sociology, Vol. 32, pp. 127–144.

[55] For insights into how Darwin's ideas of evolution were perceived by the 19th century American Protestant fundamentalists, see **Trollinger, S. L.; Trollinger, W. V**. 2017. The Bible and Creationism. English Faculty Publications, p. 105. http://ecommons.udayton.edu/eng_fac_pub/105 (13.12.2019).

[56] **Mansbach. R**. 2006. Calvinism as a Precedent for Islamic Radicalism. – The Brown Journal of World Affairs, Vol. 12(2), Winter/Spring, pp. 103–115.

prescriptions on everything from food and clothing to schooling. In short, by interpreting the Bible as a straightforward prescription of righteous living, these regimes can be deemed fundamentalist and, in 20th century parlance, totalitarian.

Several fundamental differences notwithstanding, a similar basic pattern can also be observed with Islamic fundamentalism. A perceived, either real or imaginary, threat to a traditional way of life prompts a radical fundamentalist response that digs deep into the spiritual scriptures of a people, yet exemplifies a political rather than religious move to save the traditional way of life. When speaking about Islamic radicalism, we should always keep that political aspect in mind, and although it cannot be expected to explain everything, it brings the otherwise self-restricted phenomenon out of isolation and opens it up for a more practical interpretation.

5. Religious Narratives as Propaganda Tools

ISIS has utilised religious ideas and narratives for propaganda purposes, for example, in their propaganda video "Flames of War"[57], where they speak about the Caliphate, disbelievers or non-believers (*kafir*), *Tawhid* (Arabic, 'unification or oneness of Allah'), and *jihad*.

To begin, it is necessary to clarify a couple of things to truly understand the ideological foundations of Islamic religious fanaticism, and the concept of *jihad*[58] in the beginning of the 21st century and how it is used by ISIS from an ideological point of view. First of all, what constitutes the ideological basis? The most important cornerstone of Islamist movements is, naturally, the Quran.[59] In 1938, renowned Islamist theologian Hassan al-Banna (1906–1949)[60], founder of the movement Muslim Brotherhood[61], declared: "*Allah is our ideal. Prophet is our leader. Qurʾān is our law*".[62]

---

[57] **ISIS Releases Propaganda Video: Flames of War** 2014.

[58] **Bukay, D**. 2007. Peace or Jihad? Abrogation of Islam. – Middle East Quarterly, Vol 14(4), pp. 3–11; **Mölder, Sazonov** 2016, lk 220–221.

[59] **Holy Qur'an** 1993.

[60] **Kepel** 2002, p. 27.

[61] **Aboul-Eneim, Y**. 2013. Al Ikhwan al Muslimism: The Muslim brotherhood. – Military Review, Vol. 3, pp 26–31; **Kepel** 2002, pp. 27–30.

[62] **Hirsi Ali, A**. 2011. The Quran Is Our Law; Jihad Is Our Way. – The Wall Street Journal, Opinion, February 11. https://www.wsj.com/articles/SB10001424052748704132204576136590964621006 (11.11.2019); **Mölder, Sazonov** 2016, lk 219.

Essentially, all Islamic fundamentalists[63] follow the same dogma. In 2014, the leaders of ISIS declared the Caliphate, headed by a Caliph, following the example of the medieval Islamist state established in the 7th century. The name – the Caliphate – was later appropriated by the Ottoman Empire, where the Sultans, rulers of that empire, also took the title of Caliphs. Today, this concept has been used once more, this time by ISIS. The Caliphate certainly seems to be a brand that is remarkably popular, while also being quite simple and easy to understand, and most importantly, readily available to use in propaganda videos[64], etc, not requiring a special public relations campaign. That seems to be the main reason why it has been appropriated by ISIS, very successful in conducting information warfare, as an influential propaganda weapon.[65]

Thus, ISIS has actively used the historical narrative of the Arab Caliphate, which historically existed from 632 to1258, as its foundational as well as aspirational pillar. According to Holger Mölder "*it claimed to have authority over the whole Muslim world, and through its affiliated organizations, as well as territories in the Middle East and North Africa controlled by the Islamic State.*"[66]

Many of ISIS's ideological leaders and spokesmen claim that their main goal is the establishment of a pure and undistorted Islam of Muhammad's era and the original Caliphs (Salafi views). However, this seems to be simply a useful tool for influencing people and attracting potential supporters to their ranks. What is more, ISIS's propaganda messages seem to be changing according to the situation in the Middle East.[67]

---

[63] **Davidson, L**. 1998. Islamic Fundamentalism. Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press.

[64] **ISIS Releases Propaganda Video: Flames of War** 2014.

[65] **Al-Tamimi, A**. 2017. The Myth of ISIS's Strategic Brilliance. – The Atlantic, July 20. https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2017/07/isis-defeat-plan/534330/ (28.11.2019).

[66] **Mölder, H**. 2019. The Islamic State, Clash of Civilizations and their Impact on the Development of Contemporary International Relations. – Sazonov, V.; Mölder, H.; Espak, P. (eds.) 2019. Cultural Crossroads in the Middle East: The Historical, Cultural and Political Legacy of Intercultural Dialogue and Conflict from the Ancient Near East to the Present Day (Studia Orientalia Tartuensia, Series Nova; VIII). Tartu: University of Tartu Press, pp. 314–345.

[67] **Daesh propaganda, before and after its collapse. Countering violent extremism**. 2019. Riga: NATO Strategic Communications Centre of Excellence. https://stratcomcoe.org/download/file/fid/80922 (10.12.2019).

ISIS has also used various controversial religious sayings, ideas and narratives from the Quran[68], often containing violent messages. H. Hassan[69] has pointed out that "*Isis depends heavily on what Muslim clerics consider isolated incidents described in sacred texts that it believes should not be followed as rules*". The authors agree with Hassan who has correctly remarked that "*because Isis bases its teachings on religious texts that mainstream Muslim clerics do not want to deal with head on, new recruits leave the camp feeling that they have stumbled on the true message of Islam*".

For example, Abu Omar al-Baghdadi[70], one of the original leaders of the Islamic State of Iraq, similarly to other leaders of this organization, often quoted the Quran[71] in his speeches[72], for example:

> *Whoso judges not according to what God has revealed—they are the unbelievers* (Quran 5:44).

> *The Satans inspire their friends to dispute with you; if you obey them, you are idolaters* (Quran 6:121).

In addition, the authors further offer a selection of passages from the Quran[73] which radical Islamists (e.g. ISIS, etc.) may use for their ideological and propaganda purposes, for justifying their actions and criminality (e.g. raping girls, etc.)[74]

> Quran (2:191) – *"Slay them wherever you find them and drive them out of the places whence they drove you out, for persecution is worse than slaughter."*

---

[68] **ISIS Releases Propaganda Video: Flames of War** 2014.

[69] **Hassan, H**. 2015. The secret world of Isis training camps – ruled by sacred texts and the sword. – The Guardian, January 25. https://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/jan/25/inside-isis-training-camps (12.12.2019).

[70] Abu Omar al-Baghdadi (1959–2010), born Hamid Dawud Muhammad Khalil al-Zawi, was the leader of the militant group Mujahideen Shura Council, who fought against the U.S. forces in the Iraq War. From 2006 to 2010 he served as the first emir of the Islamic State of Iraq.

[71] **Holy Qur'an** 1993.

[72] **Bunzel** 2015, p. 39.

[73] **Holy Qur'an** 1993.

[74] **Khanna, T**. 2015. Islamic State militant rapes 12-year-old girl, uses Quran to justify it. – Zeenews, August 14. https://zeenews.india.com/news/world/islamic-state-militant-rapes-12-year-old-girl-uses-quran-to-justify-it_1647059.html (12.12.2019); **Esman, A. R**. 2015. ISIS Rapes Women toward Allah. – The Investigation Project on Terrorists, October 23. https://www.investigativeproject.org/5013/isis-rapes-women-toward-allah (12.12.2019); see also **ISIS Releases Propaganda Video: Flames of War** 2014.

> Quran (3:56) – *"As to those who reject faith, I will punish them with terrible agony in this world and in the Hereafter, nor will they have anyone to help."*

> Quran (2:19) – *Kill them wherever you find them. Drive them out of the places from which they drove you.*

> Quran (8:12) – *I will cast terror into the hearts of those who disbelieve. Therefore strike off their heads and strike off every fingertip of them.*

> Quran (3:151) – *"Soon shall we cast terror into the hearts of the Unbelievers, for that they joined companions with Allah, for which He had sent no authority."*

> Quran (48:29) – *"Muhammad is the messenger of Allah. And those with him are hard (ruthless) against the disbelievers and merciful among themselves."*

These types of violent and extreme passages are often picked by ISIS from the Quran to justify their violent and radical actions.[75] This is supported by Afsaruddin's argumentation, claiming that

> *Islamist extremists have used the rubric of jihad to justify violent attacks against Muslims whom they accuse of apostasy. In contrast to such extremists, a number of modern and contemporary Muslim thinkers insist on a holistic reading of the Qurʾān, assigning great importance to the Qurʾān's restriction of military activity to self-defense in response to external aggression.[76]*

The jihadists, on the other hand, call on their supporters to wage a religious war, referring to both modern ideologists but also to the Quran:

> *Fight those who do not believe in Allah or in the Last Day and who do not consider unlawful what Allah and His Messenger have made unlawful and who do not adopt the religion of truth from those who were given the Scripture—[fight] until they give the jizyah willingly while they are humbled (Qurʾān, 9:29–30).[77]*

We know that Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, the Caliph of the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) from 2013 to 2019, studied theology and Islamic studies, and therefore knew very well how to effectively use such religious narratives for these purposes. What is more, as his official title, he took the name – Abu Bakr – of the very first Caliph of the Arab Caliphate, Abu Bakr Abdullah ibn Uthman (632-634), the first legitimate successor of Prophet

---

[75] **ISIS Releases Propaganda Video: Flames of War** 2014.

[76] **Afsaruddin** *s. a.*

[77] **Holy Qur'an** 1993.

Muhammad and also Muhammad's father-in-law. Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi purported himself as the leader of all Muslims and the vicar of Allah on Earth. Furthermore, as the Caliph, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi also took the name Ibrahim, a common name among Muslims; however, it bears noting that Ibrahim is also the Arabic name of God's messenger, the prophet Abraham. ISIS and its leaders claimed that their chosen leader, Caliph Ibrahim, was the founder of the new Caliphate or the man leading the restoration of the Caliphate as it was in 7th century, at the time of Muhammad and the first Caliph Abu Bakr. Furthermore, they maintained that only Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi is the legitimate successor of Prophet Muhammad and holds the true vision for the development and future of the Caliphate.[78]

R. Zgryziewicz, an expert on ISIS's information warfare, has pointed out:

> *In his first speech, the self-claimed Caliph, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, announced his plans to build a Muslim state and his expectations for re-establishing the Caliphate. The organization came up with a unique value proposition – the unification of the Muslim world in a newly declared state to experience the sacred benefits of as a part of the Ummah. By articulating these future benefits, Daesh was able to capture the attention and interest of specific target audiences. By June 2014, already 12,000 foreign fighters from 81 countries had joined in the fighting in Syria's civil war.*[79]

The idea of establishing a pan-Arabic Caliphate is not new, dating back to the first Caliphs who ruled in the 7th century. The territory of the ISIS Caliphate or the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL), whose establishment was declared by their newly chosen leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, was located in eastern parts of Syria and in western Iraq. Subsequently, ISIS strove to expand the territory of its Caliphate by trying to conquer the rest of Syria and Iraq, with a long-term plan to take control over Lebanon, Israel and Palestinian territory as well as invading Egypt and eventually expanding the Caliphate across the whole of North Africa and the Middle East, the Caucasus, with even the Balkans and Spain ultimately foreseen to come under Islamic rule.[80] This idea, propagated by ISIS, of a 'Caliphate'

---

[78] **Stern, J.; Berger, J. M**. 2016. ISIS. Terrori riik. – Imeline Ajalugu, Imeline Teadus. Tallinn: AS Äripäev, lk 78. [**Stern, Berger** 2016]

[79] **Zgryziewicz** 2016, p. 90.

[80] **ISIS: Portrait of a Jihadi Terrorist Organization**. 2014. – The Meir Amit Intelligence and Terrorism Information Center, November 26, p. 3. https://www.terrorism-info.org.il/en/20733/ (11.12.2019).

to unify all Muslims, was of course a utopia, but it was successfully used as a narrative of an 'ideal state of god on Earth' mainly for propaganda purposes.

For propaganda purposes, ISIS also uses the name of God (Allah)[81], which carries strong religious connotations. Their aim is to show that Allah supports them and that they are his loyal warriors. For the same reason, it was decided that the flag of ISIS would be black, carrying the following text in the Arabic language: *La 'ilaha 'illa-llah* – "There is no God but God".[82] This flag also includes a *shahada* (Islamic statement of faith), which corresponds to all Muslims of the world to *Umma*. In addition, it has also been pointed out that

> around the edges is the white circle in the middle of the ISIS flag with three words inside it: "God Messenger Mohammed." It's an interesting choice of word order given that the second part of the shahada is "and Mohammed is God's messenger."[83]

The black colour of the flag and adding the word 'Allah' to this flag, "*merges two powerful narrative themes*".[84] Interestingly, Prophet Muhammed's war banner was also black and thus, the flag of ISIS "*refers to the origin of Islam and points to the future for believers by also representing the day of the final battle in Dabiq and resurrection*".[85]

In addition, ISIS has also used Islamic eschatology, the idea of the Day of Judgment, very forcefully, even naming their online propaganda magazine "Dabiq".[86] According to Islamic eschatology, Dabiq[87] is the settlement where 'the Final Battle' between believers and non-believers is to take place. And when the rule of Caliphate has been established globally, peace will come

---

[81] For an example of how ISIS has used Allah's name in their propaganda, see **ISIS Releases Propaganda Video: Flames of War** 2014.

[82] **Prusher, I**. 2014. What the ISIS Flag Says About the Militant Group. – Time, September 9. http://time.com/3311665/isis-flag-iraq-syria (12.12.2019).

[83] *Ibid.*

[84] **Zgryziewicz** 2016, p. 99.

[85] *Ibid.*

[86] **ISIS's online magazine Dabiq**. https://www.washingtonexaminer.com/isis-fighters-have-been-run-out-of-dabiq-forcing-them-to-rename-their-magazine (11.12.2019).

[87] Dabiq is a town in northern Syria, about 40 kilometres (25 mi) northeast of Aleppo and around 10 km (6.2 mi) south of Syria's border with Turkey. See https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Dabiq, Syria (13.12.2019).

to all people in the world. As Zgryziewicz has correctly stated "*The 'Dabiq prophecy' is end-of-days story that pits the forces of Islam against the Christian West*".[88] In Islamic eschatology, as found in the Hadith, the area of Dabiq is mentioned as the place of some of the events of the Muslim *Malahim* (equivalent to the Christian idea of an apocalypse). Abu Hurayrah, a companion of Prophet Muhammad and one of the most prolific narrators of Hadith, reported that Muhammad once said:

> *The Last Hour would not come until the Romans land at al-A'maq or in Dabiq. An army consisting of the best of the people of the earth at that time will come from Medina [to defeat them].*[89]

It should be noted that ISIS's online magazine "Dabiq" promoted Jihadism, religious and political violence and genocide by using the name of God.[90] In addition, referring to the Day of Judgment was also an important and crucial element of ISIS's communication strategy.[91]

6. Elements of Arab Nationalism and Xenophobia

The emergence of ISIS was also influenced by Saddam Hussein's foreign policy[92] of militant plans and military ventures that had negative consequences for Iraq, with the Iran–Iraq war of the 1980s as just one example.[93] The Iran–Iraq war lasted for eight years and devastated the whole region, being one of the bloodiest episodes in the long opposition and conflict

---

[88] **Patrikarakos, D**. 2016. Apocalypse or Bust: The Battle for Dabiq. – Radio Free Europe, October 9. https://www.rferl.org/a/tracking-islamic-state-dabiq-battle-apocalypticism/28040703.html (13.12.2019).

[89] **Zgryziewicz** 2016, pp. 97, 99.

[90] **Alhayat Media Center 'Islam is the religion of sword, not pacifism'**. 2015. – Daesh Online Magazine 'Dabiq', January/February 2015, No 7, p. 20; **Alhayat Media Center 'Prisoners for sale'**. 2015. – Daesh Online Magazine 'Dabiq', August/September, No 11, pp. 64–65. See also **Inside the ISIS propaganda machine**. 2019. – CBS News, November 25. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2rOVBTqN9XI (13.12.2019).

[91] **Zgryziewicz** 2016, p. 99.

[92] **Sazonov** 2014b.

[93] For more on the Iran–Iraq war cf. **Fawcett, L**. 2005. International relations of the Middle East. Oxford-New York: Oxford University Press, pp. 266–268; also cf. **Karsh, E**. 2010. Iraani-Iraagi sõda 1980–1988. Tallinn: Koolibri.

between the Arabs and Persians that dates back to as early as the 7th century Arab conquests in the Middle East.[94]

This lengthy and bloody war brought the relatively economically stable and quite wealthy Iraq to its knees. Its adversary, Iran, several times larger and economically stronger, ultimately managed to weaken and demoralise the Iraqi army. The Arab nationalism that was at the time strongly promoted by Saddam Hussein and his followers (some of them later joining ISIS), who promoted xenophobia against the Kurds (specifically targeted by Saddam Hussein's genocidal policies), Jews, Persians, and religious groups such as Yazidis, Christians and the Shia, was taken by ISIS as one of its foundational ideological tenets.[95]

Similarly to ISIS, Saddam's policies were largely founded on xenophobia and included the spreading of fear and threatening with deportation and terror, actively used against the citizens of Iraq. These kinds of nationalistic roots are clearly visible also in the case of ISIS. The hatred targeting Kurds or Yazidis, widespread among ISIS fighters, reflects partly the Arab nationalist views of Saddam Hussein and his xenophobic policy towards the Kurds, Yazidis etc.[96]

However, it must be borne in mind that the 'nationalism' of ISIS is not the same as was prevalent during Saddam Hussein's reign, mainly because this strand of Arab nationalism is heavily influenced by Salafism and other Islamist ideas. What is more, ISIS fighters come from all over world and as a result, this organisation is also very international.

Saddam Hussein was also interested in ancient kings – for example, King Hammurabi (1792–1750 BC), the great conqueror and creator of the Babylonian Empire; the extremely brutal Assyrian king Sennacherib[97]

---

[94]   **Sazonov, V**. 2012. Vanad rivaalid. – Postimees, February 06, lk 6–7. https://arvamus. postimees.ee/729494/vladimir-sazonov-vanad-rivaalid (9.12.2019).

[95]   **Sazonov, V**. 2014a. Nebukadnetsarit järgides: Saddam Hussein ja muistsed Lähis-Ida despoodid. – Idakiri. Eesti Akadeemilise Orientaalseltsi aastaraamat, lk 129–130. [**Sazonov** 2014a]; **Spencer, W. J**. 2007. The Middle East. Global Studies. Dubuque: A Division of the McGraw-Hill Companies, pp. 74–75. [**Spencer** 2007] For more about genocide against Yazidis, see **Stern, Berger** 2016, lk 78–79.

[96]   **Cheterian, V**. 2019. ISIS genocide against the Yazidis and mass violence in the Middle East. – British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies, Vol. 46, pp. 1–13.

[97]   **Frahm, E**. 1997. Einleitung in Sanherib-Inschriften. – Arhiv für Orientforschung, Internationale Zeitschrift für die Wissenschaft vom Vorderen Orient, begründet von Ernst Weidner in Zusammenarbeit mit Hermann Hunger, herausgegeben von Hans Hirsch. Selbstverlag des Instituts für Orientalistik der Universität Wien. Horn: F. Berger & Söhne G.m.b.H.

(704–681 BC), and Nebuchadnezzar II[98] (605–562 BC), the most famous ruler of the Neo-Babylonian Empire, who deported Jews from Jerusalem in 587 BC – whose life experiences held plenty of lessons about regimes and establishing empires, and by using this historical knowledge, Saddam hoped to legitimize his power with their help.[99] In a political biography of Saddam Hussein, author R. J. Updike highlights the following issues regarding Saddam's imperialistic views and his anti-Semitism:

> *The rulers of Mesopotamia were especially attractive for Saddam not only because of their remarkable position in the region but also because of their military advances in Palestine. Sennacherib … the successor of Sargon II, invaded Palestine and, although he did not manage to conquer Jerusalem, he defeated some important cities in Judea and received a large impost from the king of Judah, Hezekiah. Where Sennacherib did not succeed, Nebuchadnezzar was a success: in 587 BC, after the uprising of the Jews in Palestine, he destroyed the kingdom of Judah and Jerusalem, including the Temple of Judah, and sent thousands of Jews to Babylon. Saddam often talked of this historic event and admitted that he would very much like to follow the example of the great Babylonian king.*[100]

In 2007, the German newspaper *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* published an article about the legendary Middle Eastern rulers Saladin and Nebuchadnezzar as role models, noting that Saddam's year of birth (1937) coincided with the estimated 800th anniversary of the birth of Saladin, the first sultan of Egypt and Syria, one of the most famous medieval rulers of the Arab world.[101] When Saddam Hussein learned this, he undoubtedly used it to his advantage. It was also important for Saddam that he and Saladin both originated from Tikrit and, just like Saladin, Saddam wanted to unite the Arabs under his rule and to ultimately become as powerful and revered as Saladin once was.

---

[98] On Nebuchadnezzar II see **da Riva, R**. 2008. The Neo-Babylonian Royal Inscriptions. An Introduction. Guides to the Mesopotamian Textual Record. Volume 4. Münster: Ugarit-Verlag; **da Riva, R**. 2013. Nebuchadnezzar II's Prism (EK 7834): A New Edition. – Zeitschrift für Assyriologie, Vol 103(2), pp. 196–229; **Sazonov** 2014a, lk 115.

[99] **Sazonov** 2014b.

[100] **Апдайк, Дж**. 1999. Садам Хусейн. Политическая биография. Ростов-на-Дону: Феникс, pp 225–226; **Spencer** 2007, pp 73–74; **Sazonov** 2014b.

[101] Cf. **Hermann, R**. 2007. Saladin und Nebukadnezar als Vorbild. [Saladin and Nebukadnezar as Role Models]. – Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung, January 02, S. 3. https://www.faz.net/aktuell/politik/ausland/saddam-hussein-saladin-und-nebukadnezar-als-vorbild-1385362.html (10.10.2019); **Sazonov** 2014b.

Similarly, the leaders of ISIS strive to unite all Arabs under their rule, using the concept of the Caliphate, as well as Arab nationalist narratives and the nationalist sentiments of local people. It is reported that Saddam Hussein hated Jews and Iranians and he disliked the Kurds. When he was young, Saddam Hussein was strongly influenced by his uncle Khairallah Talfah, an extreme Arab nationalist and an official of the Iraqi Ba'ath Party, who took Saddam into politics and later became Saddam's father-in-law.[102] In addition, Saddam and the Ba'ath party were also heavily influenced by the ideas of Pan-Arabism and the Arab nationalism of Gamal Abdel Nasser, long-time President of Egypt (1954–1970).[103] Writing about former officers of Saddam's regime, Isabel Coles and Ned Parker have reported the following:

> *Saddam-era officers have been a powerful factor in the rise of Islamic State, in particular in the Sunni militant group's victories in Iraq last year. Islamic State then out-muscled the Sunni-dominated Ba'ath Party and absorbed thousands of its followers. The new recruits joined Saddam-era officers who already held key posts in Islamic State. The Ba'athists have strengthened the group's spy networks and battlefield tactics and are instrumental in the survival of its self-proclaimed Caliphate, according to interviews with dozens of people, including Ba'ath leaders, former intelligence and military officers.*[104]

According to some sources, at least over 100 former members of Saddam's military and intelligence officers are now actively involved in ISIS.[105] What role have they played in ISIS? It has been reported that former officers of Saddam's regime helped to devise ISIS's military strategies, establishing its organization and discipline, while also integrating military operations with such terror tactics as suicide bombings, i.e. utilising the methods of hybrid warfare. It is also known that several of ISIS's leadership positions have been occupied by former members of the Ba'ath Party.[106] In 2003, the last year

---

[102] **Sazonov** 2014a, lk 121–122.

[103] **Jillani, A**. 1991. Nasser, Saddam and Pan-Arabism. – Pakistan Horizon, Vol. 44, No. 2, pp. 75–88.

[104] **Cole, I.; Parker, N**. 2015. How Saddam's men help Islamic State rule – Reuters, December 11. https://www.reuters.com/investigates/special-report/mideast-crisis-iraq-islamicstate/ (9.12.2019). [**Cole, Parker** 2015]

[105] *Ibid.*

[106] **Sly, L**. 2015. How Saddam Hussein's former military officers and spies are controlling Isis. – Independent, April 05. https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/middle-east/how-saddam-husseins-former-military-officers-and-spies-are-controlling-isis-10156610.html (9.12.2019).

of Saddam Hussein's reign, Iraq's security structures were already strongly influenced by Salafism, with many members of its intelligence services reported to have ties with radical Salafists (e.g. Samir Abd Muhammad al-Khlifawi aka Haji Bakr, previously a colonel in the Iraqi Intelligence Service, and later a senior leader of ISIL, heading its Military Council and leading its operations in Syria until being killed by Syrian rebels in January 2014).[107] Before 2003, when the U.S. invaded Iraq, al-Khlifawi had been a colonel in the Iraqi Army, and had experience in working on weapons development and in the intelligence services of Saddam Hussein's Air Defence Corps at Habbaniya Air Base in Iraq. According to the same sources (i.e. Iraqi journalist Hisham al-Hashimi), Haji Bakr was "*a nationalist, not an Islamist*".[108] Thus, one of the creators and leaders of ISIS was an Arab nationalist and a colonel in Saddam's army.

In conclusion, it can be surmised that ISIS has some connections with the Arab nationalist legacy of Saddam's regime and we know that many former high-ranking officers of Saddam's army, prominent members of Iraq's ruling Ba'ath Party, have later played quite significant and in some cases even key roles in ISIS. We also know that many of them were Arab nationalists, at least during the period of Saddam Hussein's reign. Did their views change? It could be argued that in ISIS, there seems to exist some kind of mixture, a hybrid ideology and a Ba'athist-Salafist nexus. Undoubtedly, the so-called Islamic State is effectively trying to introduce radical Salafist doctrine to mobilize its followers and also to recruit fighters from outside of Iraq and Levant. However, it is important to stress that ISIS does not rely only on the Salafi Jihadist doctrine, because ISIS is also at least partly controlled by former Ba'athist Iraqi officers that are mostly represented ideologically by Saddam era Arab nationalists who played a critical role in the establishment and leadership of ISIS.[109]

---

[107] **Reuters, Ch**. 2015. Secret Files Reveal the Structure of Islamic State. – Spiegel Online, April 18. https://www.spiegel.de/international/world/islamic-state-files-show-structure-of-islamist-terror-group-a-1029274.html (11.12.2019).

[108] *Ibid.*

[109] **Natali, D**. 2015. The Islamic State's Baathist roots. – Al-Monitor, April 24. https://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/fa/originals/2015/04/baathists-behind-the-islamic-state.html (09.12.2019).

7. Conclusion

As can be seen from the discussion above, ISIS's ideological core or foundational tenets are not based on purely religious narratives and motives. The Quran and Hadiths, Sharia law as well as radical and conservative Islamic views and understandings (e.g. radical Salafism, Wahhabism, and Salafi Jihadism) are not the only ideological pillars of ISIS; instead, their leaders, spokesmen and propagandists have used violent and radical interpretations of sacred Islamic texts to justify their crimes, violence and genocide conducted against religious and ethnic minorities in Syria and Iraq.

This is related to another essential core element of ISIS's ideology – Arab nationalism. However, although it is not strongly promoted by ISIS, it is still discernible in their approach via xenophobia and genocide. What is more, some prominent founders and leaders of ISIS, such as Haji Bakr, formerly served in the Iraq armed forces under Saddam Hussein, whose underlying ideology was primarily nationalist, not Islamist. Although we did not research the issue and roots of the elements of Arab nationalism in ISIS' ideology, it seems that this variation of Arab nationalism is partially a legacy of Saddam Hussein's regime whose despotic and brutal rule was extremely xenophobic towards many religious and ethnic groups in Iraq and beyond (e.g. Iranians, Yazidis, Kurds, Jews, etc.). As reported, a large number of former members of the Iraqi Ba'ath Party and high-ranking army officers later joined ISIS, not to mention the fact that they participated in creating and in leading this terrorist organization. Therefore, it should not be a surprise that they incorporated, a least partially, their Arab nationalist and xenophobic views, ideas and understandings in the core ideology of ISIS.

Finally, the historical inter-cultural dimension bears emphasising as well because Islamic radicalism and fundamentalism cannot be properly understood without looking at these developments in the wider context of social, political and cultural pressures. In that regard, although it takes quite grotesque forms, Islamic radicalism also carries an element of political protection of their traditional way of life.

References

Aboul-Eneim, Y. 2013. Al Ikhwan al Muslimism: The Muslim brotherhood. – Military Review, Vol. 3, pp 26–31.

Afsaruddin, A. (*sine anno*). Jihad. – Encyclopaedia Britannica. https://www.britannica.com/topic/jihad (13.12.2019).

Alhayat Media Center 'Islam is the religion of sword, not pacifism'. 2015. – Daesh Online Magazine 'Dabiq', January/February 2015, No 7.

Alhayat Media Center 'Prisoners for sale'. 2015. – Daesh Online Magazine 'Dabiq', August/September, No 11.

Al-Tamimi, A. 2017. The Myth of ISIS's Strategic Brilliance. – The Atlantic, July 20. https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2017/07/isis-defeat-plan/534330/ (28.11.2019).

Bahrani, Z. 2008. Rituals of War. The Body of Violence in Mesopotamia. New York: Zone Books.

Bukay, D. 2007. Peace or Jihad? Abrogation of Islam. – Middle East Quarterly, Vol 14(4), pp. 3–11.

Bunzel, C. 2015. From Paper State to Caliphate: The Ideology of the Islamic State. – The Brookings Project on U.S. Relations with the Islamic World. Analysis paper, No. 19, March. https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2016/06/The-ideology-of-the-Islamic-State.pdf (12.12.2019).

Burke, J. 2015. The New Threat from Islamic Militancy. London: The Bodley Head.

Cheterian, V. 2019. ISIS genocide against the Yazidis and mass violence in the Middle East. – British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies, Vol. 46, pp. 1–13.

Cole, I.; Parker, N. 2015. How Saddam's men help Islamic State rule – Reuters, December 11. https://www.reuters.com/investigates/special-report/mideast-crisis-iraq-islamicstate/ (9.12.2019).

da Riva, R. 2008. The Neo-Babylonian Royal Inscriptions. An Introduction. Guides to the Mesopotamian Textual Record. Volume 4. Münster: Ugarit-Verlag.

da Riva, R. 2013. Nebuchadnezzar II's Prism (EK 7834): A New Edition. – Zeitschrift für Assyriologie, Vol 103(2), pp. 196–229.

Daesh propaganda, before and after its collapse. Countering violent extremism. 2019. Riga: NATO Strategic Communications Centre of Excellence. https://stratcomcoe.org/download/file/fid/80922 (10.12.2019).

Danahar, P. 2014. The Middle East. The World after the Arab Spring. London-New Delhi-New York-Sydney: Bloomsbury.

Davidson, L. 1998. Islamic Fundamentalism. Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press.

Emerson, M. O., Hartman, D. 2006. The Rise of Religious Fundamentalism. – Annual Review of Sociology, Vol. 32, pp. 127–144.

Esman, A. R. 2015. ISIS Rapes Women toward Allah. – The Investigation Project on Terrorists, October 23. https://www.investigativeproject.org/5013/isis-rapes-women-toward-allah (12.12.2019).

Fadel, M. 2019. Ideas, Ideology, and the Roots of the Islamic State. – Critical Review. A Journal of Politics and Society, Vol. 31(1), pp. 83–94.

Fawcett, L. 2005. International relations of the Middle East. Oxford-New York: Oxford University Press.

Frahm, E. 1997. Einleitung in Sanherib-Inschriften. – Arhiv für Orientforschung, Internationale Zeitschrift für die Wissenschaft vom Vorderen Orient, begründet von Ernst Weidner in Zusammenarbeit mit Hermann Hunger, herausgegeben von Hans Hirsch. Selbstverlag des Instituts für Orientalistik der Universität Wien. Horn: F. Berger & Söhne G.m.b.H.

Fraser, T. G.; Mango, A.; McNamara, R. 2017. Making the Modern Middle East. London: Gingko.

Hassan, H. 2015. The secret world of Isis training camps – ruled by sacred texts and the sword. – The Guardian, January 25.
https://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/jan/25/inside-isis-training-camps (12.12.2019).

Hermann, R. 2007. Saladin und Nebukadnezar als Vorbild. [Saladin and Nebu-kadnezar as Role Models]. – Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung, January 02.
https://www.faz.net/aktuell/politik/ausland/saddam-hussein-saladin-und-nebukadnezar-als-vorbild-1385362.html (10.10.2019).

Hirsi Ali, A. 2011. The Quran Is Our Law; Jihad Is Our Way. – The Wall Street Journal, Opinion, February 11.
https://www.wsj.com/articles/SB10001424052748704132204576136590964621006 (11.11.2019).

Holy Qur'an 1993. Translated by M. H. Shakir. Qum, Islamic Republic of Iran: Ansariyan Publications P.O.B. 37185/187.

Hübsch, H. 2001. Fanatische Krieger im Namen Allahs: die Wurzeln des islamis-chen Terrors. Die Deutsche Bibliothek. München: Heinrich Hugendubel Verlag.

Ianes, E. 2019. ISIS has been waiting for this very moment as Trump-fueled chaos in Syria helps it regroup. – Business Insider, October 15.
https://www.businessinsider.com/isis-could-regroup-amid-trump-fueled-chaos-in-syria-2019-10 (10.10.2019).

Inside the ISIS propaganda machine. 2019. – CBS News, November 25.
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2rOVBTqN9XI (13.12.2019).

ISIS Releases Propaganda Video: Flames of War. 2014. – The Rubin Report, September 17.
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jAoH0Xr5a8c (11.12.2019).

ISIS: Portrait of a Jihadi Terrorist Organization. 2014. – The Meir Amit Intelligence and Terrorism Information Center, November 26.
https://www.terrorism-info.org.il/en/20733/ (11.12.2019).

Jillani, A. 1991. Nasser, Saddam and Pan-Arabism. – Pakistan Horizon, Vol. 44, No. 2, pp. 75–88.

Karsh, E. 2010. Iraani-Iraagi sõda 1980–1988. Tallinn: Koolibri.

Kepel, G. 2002. Jihad. The Trail of Political Islam. Cambridge, Massachusetts: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press.

Kepel, G. 2006. Jihad: The Trail of Political Islam. London: I. B. Tauris.

Khanna, T. 2015. Islamic State militant rapes 12-year-old girl, uses Quran to justify it. – Zeenews, August 14.
https://zeenews.india.com/news/world/islamic-state-militant-rapes-12-year-old-girl-uses-quran-to-justify-it_1647059.html (12.12.2019).

Livesey, B. The Salafist Movement. – Frontline.
https://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/shows/front/special/sala.html
(11.11.2019).

Mansbach. R. 2006. Calvinism as a Precedent for Islamic Radicalism. – The Brown
Journal of World Affairs, Vol. 12(2), Winter/Spring, pp. 103–115.

Martin, R. C.; Barzegar, A. (eds.) 2010. Islamism, Contested Perspectives on
Political Islam. Stanford University Press. Stanford, California.

Massoud, M. F. 2018. How an Islamic State Rejected Islamic Law. – The American
Journal of Comparative Law, Vol. 66, Issue 3, September, pp. 579–602.
https://doi.org/10.1093/ajcl/avy036.

McDonnell, Th. M. 2010. The West's Colonization of Muslim Land and the Rise of
Islamic Fundamentalism. Chapter 1: The United States, International Law, and
the Struggle against Terrorism. – DigitalCommons@Pace. Pace Law Faculty
Publications.
http://digitalcommons.pace.edu/lawfaculty/833/ (13.12.2019).

Mölder, H. 2019. The Islamic State, Clash of Civilizations and their Impact on
the Development of Contemporary International Relations. – Sazonov, V.;
Mölder, H.; Espak, P. (eds.) 2019. Cultural Crossroads in the Middle East: The
Historical, Cultural and Political Legacy of Intercultural Dialogue and Conflict
from the Ancient Near East to the Present Day (Studia Orientalia Tartuensia,
Series Nova; VIII). Tartu: University of Tartu Press, pp. 314–345.

Mölder, H., Sazonov, V. 2019. The Development of Intercultural Dialogue in the
Middle East: Contemporary Ideological-Religious Conflicts and their Historical
Roots. – Sazonov, V.; Mölder, H.; Espak, P. (eds.). Cultural Crossroads in the
Middle East – Historical, Cultural and Political Legacy of Intercultural Dialogue
and Conflict from Ancient Near East to Present Days. Tartu: University of Tartu
Press, pp. 10–35.

Mölder, H; Sazonov, V. 2016. Sõjateoloogia ilmingud Lähis-Idas Da'ishi näitel:
kas religioosne liikumine või poliitilis-sõjaline organisatsioon? – Sõjateadlane,
nr 3, lk 208−231.

Natali, D. 2015. The Islamic State's Baathist roots. – Al-Monitor, April 24.
https://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/fa/originals/2015/04/baathists-behind-the-
islamic-state.html (09.12.2019).

New, D. S. 2002. Holy War. The Rise of Militant Christian, Jewish and Islamic
Fundamentalism. Jefferson, NC, London: McFarland & Company.

Patrikarakos, D. 2016. Apocalypse or Bust: The Battle for Dabiq. – Radio Free
Europe, October 9.
https://www.rferl.org/a/tracking-islamic-state-dabiq-battle-apocalypti-
cism/28040703.html (13.12.2019).

Peterson, Ü. 2005. Džihaadi kontseptsiooni kujunemine Koraanis. Magistritöö,
Tartu Ülikooli filosoofiateaduskond. Tartu: Tartu Ülikool.

Pink, J. 2010. Tradition and Ideology in Contemporary Sunnite Qur'ānic Exegesis:
Qur'ānic Commentaries from the Arab World, Turkey and Indonesia and their
Interpretation of Q 5:51. – Die Welt des Islams, Vol. 50(1), pp. 3–59.

Prusher, I. 2014. What the ISIS Flag Says About the Militant Group. – Time, September 9.
http://time.com/3311665/isis-flag-iraq-syria (12.12.2019).

Qutbism (*sine anno*). – Counter Extremist Project.
https://www.counterextremism.com/threat/qutbism (12.12.2019).

Rashid, A. 2002. Jihad. The Rise of Militant Islam in Central Asia. A World Policy Institute Book. New Haven & London: Yale University Press.

Reuters, Ch. 2015. Secret Files Reveal the Structure of Islamic State. – Spiegel Online, April 18.
https://www.spiegel.de/international/world/islamic-state-files-show-structure-of-islamist-terror-group-a-1029274.html (11.12.2019).

Roy, O. 2008. The Politics of Chaos in the Middle East. New York: Columbia University Press.

Rubin, B. M. (ed.) 2009. Guide to Islamist Movements. New York, London: M. E. Sharpe, Amonk.

Sazonov, V. 2012. Vanad rivaalid. – Postimees, February 06.
https://arvamus.postimees.ee/729494/vladimir-sazonov-vanad-rivaalid (9.12.2019).

Sazonov, V. 2014a. Nebukadnetsarit järgides: Saddam Hussein ja muistsed Lähis-Ida despoodid. – Idakiri. Eesti Akadeemilise Orientaalseltsi aastaraamat, lk 114–133.

Sazonov, V. 2014b. Outbreaks of Islamism in Iraq – the Rebirth of the Caliphate? – Diplomaatia, September 22.
https://icds.ee/outbreaks-of-islamism-in-iraqthe-rebirth-of-the-caliphate/ (9.12.2019).

Selengut, C. 2003. Sacred Fury: Understanding Religious Violence. Walnut Creek, CA: AltaMira Press.

Sly, L. 2015. How Saddam Hussein's former military officers and spies are controlling Isis. – Independent, April 05.
https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/middle-east/how-saddam-husseins-former-military-officers-and-spies-are-controlling-isis-10156610.html (9.12.2019).

Spencer, W. J. 2007. The Middle East. Global Studies. Dubuque: A Division of the McGraw-Hill Companies.

Stern, J.; Berger, J. M. 2016. ISIS. Terrori riik. – Imeline Ajalugu, Imeline Teadus. Tallinn: AS Äripäev.

Zgryziewicz, R. 2016. Daesh Strategic Communications. – Kudors, A.; Pabriks, A. (eds.). The War in Syria: Lessons for the West. The Centre for East European Policy Studies. Riga: University of Latvia Press.
https://www.cimic-coe.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/04/20160101_UC_The-War-in-Syria-Lessons-for-the-West.pdf (10.10.2019).

Zgryziewicz, R.; Grzyb, T.; Fahmy, Sh.; Shaheen J. 2015. Daesh Information Campaign and its Influence. Results of the Study. Riga: NATO Strategic Communications Centre of Excellence.
https://www.stratcomcoe.org/daesh-information-campaign-and-its-influence-1 (09.12.2019).

The ideology of the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant. – Wikipedia.
https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ideology_of_the_Islamic_State_of_Iraq_and_
the_Levant#cite_note-42 (12.12.2019).

Trollinger, S. L.; Trollinger, W. V. 2017. The Bible and Creationism. English
Faculty Publications.
http://ecommons.udayton.edu/eng_fac_pub/105 (13.12.2019).

Williams, J. 2015. How ISIS uses and abuses Islam. – Vox, November 18.
https://www.vox.com/2015/11/18/9755478/isis-islam (11.12.2019).

In Russian:

Апдайк, Дж. 1999. Садам Хусейн. Политическая биография. Ростов-на-Дону:
Феникс.

Бертон, Д. 2006. Мусульманское предание: ввение в хадисоведение. Москва-
Санкт-Петербург: Диля.

Dr. **VLADIMIR SAZONOV**
Senior Researcher at the Estonian Military Academy and Researcher at
the Estonian Academy of Security Sciences

Dr. **ILLIMAR PLOOM**
Associate Professor in Politics and Civil-Military Co-operation at
the Estonian Military Academy