

# The Right Question About the Islamic State's Ideology

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## ABOUT THE AUTHORS



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Jacob Olidort, a 2016-2017 Soref fellow at The Washington Institute, focuses on the history and ideology of Salafi movements and Islamist groups in the Middle East.



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**Efforts to defeat the Islamic State cannot succeed without making clear to the group's adepts that their vision for society has no chance of remaining an effective battle cry in the long term, much less becoming a functioning state.**

In the wake of last month's attacks in Beirut, Baghdad, Sinai, and Paris, and this month's in San Bernardino, commentators are revisiting the debates earlier this year about whether the Islamic State is truly Islamic and, if so, what makes it Islamic. Just as then, today we are asking the wrong questions. This can be an interesting theoretical debate, but is neither academically nor strategically productive. These are questions on which we will never forge an agreement, and thus attempting to answer them does not bring us any closer to understanding how to stop it.

If we want to stop the self-proclaimed Islamic State's recruitment to violence, a better question is how does the group transform centuries-old theological concepts into real and present threats? Answering that question requires that we begin by stipulating that the Islamic State is a Salafi organization. Salafism is based on an exclusive adherence to this early Islamic Sunni theology. Next, we must recognize the historical division of Salafism between violent and non-violent strains in the 20th century under specific political conditions. Finally, and perhaps most urgently, we might consider the lessons of this history for our own strategic planning today...

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