What Is Salafism?

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Articles & Testimony

ISIS and other groups have appropriated an inherently nonpolitical ideology to suit their political ambitions.

In the wake of the bombing of the Russian plane in Sinai and the attacks in Paris, the self-proclaimed Islamic State (also known as ISIS) seems bent on confrontation with the West. The group's minute-by-minute statements, social media posts, and videos seem to offer a flood of concurring information.

Lost in the wash of information, though, has been an examination of ISIS' precise religious ideology and how it informs the group's strategy. Some have even cast doubt on the worth of such investigations. "There should be no 'deeper understanding' of the ISIS terrorists," wrote the Slovenian Marxist philosopher Slavoj Zizek on November 16, responding to the Paris attacks, which he described as "reactions to European brutal interventions." Writing in the *Wall Street Journal* in the aftermath of the *Charlie Hebdo* attacks in France earlier this year, the activist and author Ayaan Hirsi Ali likewise wrote that "today's Islamists are driven by a political ideology."

But the relationship between the group's strategy, politics, and religious ideology is complex, and understanding it is the first step to confronting it. Part of the apparent confusion is that Salafism -- the ideology to which ISIS subscribes -- is inherently nonpolitical. In fact, for much of its history in the twentieth century, leading Salafists criticized political groups, particularly the Muslim Brotherhood, for being distracted by modern concerns and not focused enough on what Salafists regarded as the "purification" of creed. It was only after the Arab Spring that some Salafists started moving in the opposite direction.

So why is it that some Salafists choose to remain outside of the political arena altogether while others jump right in? First, a definition of Salafism is in order. It is often lumped together with Islamism, the ideology of the Muslim Brotherhood, for example. But they are not the same thing.

Islamism as practiced by the Muslim Brotherhood is a modern ideology that seeks to introduce Islam into the political sphere, the way a lobby group would, for example. Islamists are famous for forming political parties, participating in elections, and pushing for constitutional reform. Their targets are governments, universities, and any other institutions into which they can integrate Islam.

Salafism, on the other hand, has sought to "purify" Islam of Western influence and centuries' worth of "deviant" digressions from the true Islam (which, according to its practitioners, includes Shiism, Sufism, and even non-Salafist Sunni). Salafism is strictly Sunni, and when opening a Salafist text, one would be more likely to find a discussion of an obscure theological concept than any mention of strategy or goals.

Salafists define Islam as anything that was explicitly condoned by Muhammad and that was upheld by his first three generations of Sunni followers (until the ninth century). This view is based on a hadith, a statement of Muhammad's, in which he allegedly said that "the best of my community is my generation, then those who follow them, then those who follow them." By extension, anything that appeared after that -- and anything Muhammad did not explicitly condone -- is considered un-Islamic, an extremely broad category. Of course, secular political ideologies, nation-states, political parties, and so on are all, by this definition, un-Islamic. In short, whereas the Muslim Brotherhood's Islamism accommodates the trappings of modern political life, the Salafists' does not.

POLITICS AS UNUSUAL

Paradoxically for an apolitical ideology, Salafism has become a major force in the region's politics. This story begins with the Arab Spring, which started in January 2011 and marked a significant turn in the course of Islamism in the twentieth century. The Arab Spring saw the rapid rise and fall of the Muslim Brotherhood, the region's oldest Islamist movement, on its home turf in Egypt. It also saw the formation of Salafist parties in Egypt and elsewhere, which, betraying the Salafist principles of rejecting modern institutions, participated in postrevolution political transitions.

In Egypt, for example, the Salafist Al-Nour Party was created in 2011. Perhaps owing to the total lack of any previous political experience, it had few substantive policy positions (an omission that ultimately turned out for the better, since it allowed Nour members to later dissociate from the ousted Muslim Brotherhood President Mohamed Morsi and to weather subsequent efforts of the government of Egyptian President Abdel Fattah el-Sisi to curb Islamic influence in politics). Rather, aside from insisting on the primacy of Islamic law, as all Islamists had done before, it branded itself as representative of Egyptian society, even partnering with Copts. In the year leading up to the elections that are currently under way, Nour removed virtually all religious slogans from its platform.

Nour turned out to be more politically sophisticated than the other religious parties in Egypt, which chose to attack the Sisi government for its suppression of political opposition and met various unhappy ends. Nour's acuity was evident in its founding conference in June 2011, at which the party's head, Emad Abdul Ghafour, announced that he would pursue "legal methods...not those used by political powers who deceive the Egyptian people...Egyptians must live in justice and in peace." Since then, Nour leaders have routinely condemned violence (both religiously inspired, including by ISIS, and popular demonstrations). And rather than insisting on applying Islamic law, Nour has vaguely promoted the rule of law.

Nour's efforts may be impressive, but because Salafist ideology traditionally prohibits participation in modern politics, the party hasn't really been a focal point for Egyptian Salafists, even if it represented their ideology. Rather, groups ranging from the Salafi Front to ISIS' satellite in the Sinai Peninsula, have either kept silent about, criticized, or (in the case of the later) violently opposed Nour's participation in the elections. They have focused their rhetoric on theological dimensions of current events, for which they can offer commentary that betrays neither their sectarianism nor their physical safety. One such topic, for example, was Russia's recent involvement in Syria. Nour's

parent organization, the Salafi Call, condemned the operations because of Russia's support for a Shiite regime that oppresses Sunnis.

In Jordan, the leading Salafists remain outside of the parliamentary sphere. Since the 1980s, the nonviolent factions have advocated political quiescence rather than popular and violent agitation. They have gone so far as to condemn the tide of *takfir* (excommunication) at ISIS' hands and have even criticized physical involvement in the Palestinian cause. As a result, they have attracted criticism not only from jihadists but also from various secular segments of society.

For some Salafist groups, participating in political processes -- or at least not getting in the way of them -- has been a wise strategic choice, keeping them out of their local governments' targeting sights. Still, the choice has opened them to the criticism of other political parties on the one hand and other Salafist groups on the other. That has, in turn, cost them their grassroots supporters, who regarded them as betraying principles in favor of political exigencies.

ISIS CRISIS

This brings us to the case of ISIS, which evolved from the theological vision of Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, who, unlike al Qaeda's Osama bin Laden, prioritized purging the Middle East of Shiites and other deviants. It openly rejects the political jargon of constitutions and modern politics. ISIS texts, much like those of other Salafists, are filled with discussions of the hadith, early Islamic theological concepts, and statements from specific premodern figures thought to uphold the Salafist creed.

Yet the group has been able to make its theology relevant to real-world political grievances. Born in an Iraq beset by the rise of Shiite militias and encouraged by a civil war in Syria that progressively took on sectarian undertones, ISIS -- unlike al Qaeda --won recruits by promising true Islam. Today, even as ISIS takes on Western targets, it devotes equal energy to classroom materials explicating its theological views. And ultimately, its success will depend on this program -- its unwavering commitment to establishing a theologically authentic state rather than a modern political one.

Although ISIS' territorial expansion and attacks on the West will continue to captivate observers, local populations, and adherents, those are not the reasons for its successes. Rather, it is the group's doctrinally consistent bypassing of Western political culture that has allowed it to pick up so many recruits. No measure of rhetorical "countering" of ISIS' narrative can be successful without physical intervention.

To face the ISIS threat, the world must understand that ISIS, as well as various other proponents of Salafism, is part of a new chapter in the book of Islamism. These entities are committed to core concepts and texts that were articulated long ago and, for the first time in the religion's history, have demonstrated an ability to apply them. Although nonviolent Salafism will continue to appeal to those more concerned with surviving in their local communities -- and, it should be emphasized, such nonviolent voices represent the majority of the world's Salafists -- ISIS' project will continue to attract and expand as long as it has the means to enforce its way of thinking.

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