



(Image released 4 January 2016 by Associated Press)

This image, taken from undated video footage issued by Islamic State (IS) militants, shows five men accused of being spies for the United Kingdom just before their execution. Released online and yet to be independently verified, the footage shows a man waving a gun as he references Britain's "handful of planes" carrying out air attacks on IS targets in Iraq and Syria. It also shows the five men "confessing" to filming and photographing sites in exchange for money within Raqqa, the capital of the IS's self-declared caliphate.

Beheading, Raping, and Burning: How the Islamic State Justifies Its Actions

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No one attentive to world events can fail to be aware of the grisly acts of terror being perpetrated by Islamic State (IS): beheadings, rapes, drownings, shootings, burning a pilot alive,

blowing up prisoners trapped in a car, and even involving child soldiers in the perpetration of some of their execution rituals. The world—including members of the Muslim community who have roundly condemned

IS's actions as abhorrent and un-Islamic—is horrified by what it sees. So, how does IS justify what it does? This article will explore this question by examining the commentary IS offers on events in its online magazine, Dabiq, and conclude by evaluating IS's justification.

Islamic State

IS is an Islamist organization; Islamist movements are those that aspire to use the Quran and the deeds and sayings of the prophet Muhammad (the latter two are collectively known as the *sunnah*) as the basis for organizing society. Islamists regard the Quran and *sunnah* as revelations of God's will and believe that most countries that call themselves Muslim are far from adhering to them. Those countries failing to implement Muslim law (sharia) are instead seen as corrupt, guided by leaders who have defiled themselves through contact with non-Muslim nations of the West. Consequently, IS believes that reordering society in accordance with the God-given tenets revealed in the Quran and the *sunnah* is the antidote for the moral bankruptcy of Western society.

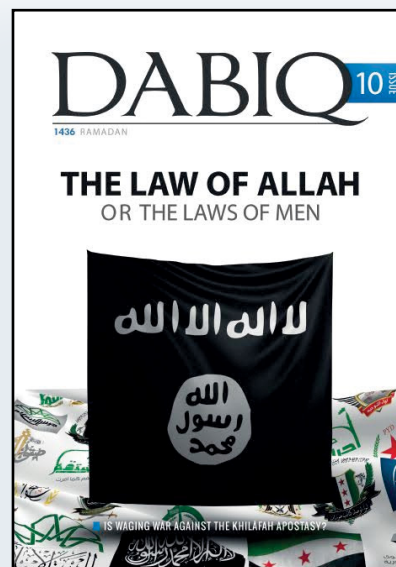
Their belief in the inerrancy of the Quran as God's word to man is a primary aspect of IS's nature as a fundamentalist group. Fundamentalist interpretations of religion generally include the following characteristics:

- ◆ Its members are seen as “real” believers in contrast to surrounding societies and to members of their faith who hold views different from their own.
- ◆ Democracy is rejected in favor of a state in which religious law is implemented.
- ◆ The days when their faith began are seen to be ideal and therefore serve as a model for how things should be now.
- ◆ Modern religious scholarship is rejected.
- ◆ Only a literal interpretation of what are seen as inerrant foundational texts is seen to be valid.
- ◆ Its members hold apocalyptic beliefs—the end times are seen to be near.
- ◆ Fundamentalist Islamists wish to spread their faith together with the associated Islamic political system worldwide.

Islamic State's Fundamentalist Mission

Articles in Dabiq evince all such fundamentalist characteristics.¹ An article in the first edition of Dabiq

summarizes what IS sees as its mission: the establishment of an Islamic state by force of arms, or *jihad* (holy war). To justify its position, it quotes the Quran: “Say to those who disbelieve ... And fight them, so that sedition might end and the only religion will be that of Allah” (8:38-9).² In the second volume of the magazine, the establishment of such a state is seen to be a multinational mission: “We must confront them [people] with the fact that they've turned away from religion, while we hold onto it ... we're completely ready to stand in the face of anyone who attempts to divert us from our commitment to making the religion of Allah triumphant over all other religions, and that we will continue to fight the people of deviation and misguidance until



Dabiq is the title of the official propaganda publication of the Islamic State (IS). It is an online magazine that promulgates IS ideology, policies, and objectives while also serving as a platform for grandiose threats against the West and other perceived enemies of IS such as Shia Muslims, Yazidis, and Jews. First published in July 2014 in several languages, including English, it uses sophisticated Western-style photo imagery and advertising techniques specifically aimed at recruiting young disaffected audiences. In doing so, it features lurid photos of the torture and execution of those described as IS opponents. Dabiq takes its name from a small town in northern Syria where, Islamic tradition holds, the apocalyptic final battle between Muslims and Christians will take place that results in a Muslim victory and ushers in the end of the secular world and a new Muslim world order.



(Image from ISIS video)

An image taken from a 2015 Islamic State video purportedly shows Al Farouk training camp for “cubs” [children]. The camp is in Raqqa, Syria, according to Flashpoint Intelligence, a global security firm and NBC News consultant.

we die trying to make the religion triumphant.”³ In the fifth edition of the magazine, the authors say that the IS flag will expand until “it covers all western and eastern extents of the Earth, filling the world with the truth and justice of Islam.”⁴

To establish the rule of Islam both within Muslim countries and worldwide, war will be necessary; not for its own sake, but to ensure that the will of Allah is carried out. In volume 7 of *Dabiq*, this is brought home in an article titled “Islam is the Religion of the Sword Not Pacifism.” Its author writes, “Allah has revealed Islam to be the religion of the sword, and evidence of this is so profuse that only a *zindiq* (heretic) would argue otherwise.”⁵ He justifies his position by quoting a variety of texts from the Quran: “Then, when the Sacred months are over, kill the idolaters wherever you find them, take them [as captives], besiege them, and lie in wait for them” (9:5); “Fight those among the People of the Book [Jews and Christians] who do not believe in Allah and the Last Day ...” (9:29); “O Prophet, fight the unbelievers and their hypocrites and be stern with them. Their abode is Hell, and what a terrible fate” (9:73). Other texts from the Quran also reinforce the point.

On the basis of those texts, members of IS are free to kill anyone who does not follow their own interpretation of Islam and those of other faiths. It is possible, therefore, to kill Shia Muslims, known by members

of IS as *Rafidah* (those who reject [true Islam]). For example, twenty-five were killed in an attack on a Shia mosque in Kuwait City in June 2015. Elsewhere, a gunman linked to IS killed five Shia Muslims in Saudi Arabia during its Ashura festival the following October, and more than forty were killed in a suicide bombing in Beirut in November of the same year.

People of other faiths are also persecuted. Christians are told to convert to Islam or pay a special tax known as *jizya*; thousands of Christians in Iraq have fled their homes as a result. In February 2015, IS posted one of its grisly videos online: twenty-one members of the Egyptian Coptic Church, dressed in orange coveralls, were led along a beach in Libya by members of IS dressed in black. The video showed their theatrically staged beheadings.

Beheading and the Use of Child Soldiers

Beheading seems to be one of IS’s favorite methods of killing. It is favored, first, because it puts fear into those who oppose it; hence, we read of the Iraqi army simply melting away when IS took over parts of northern Iraq. Second, it is favored because it is sanctioned by verses in the Quran: “Strike [those who disbelieve] upon their necks and strike every fingertip of theirs” (8:12); “When you meet the unbelievers, strike their

necks till you have bloodied them" (47:4). The beheading of between six and nine hundred Jews from the Banu Qurayza on the orders of Muhammad is recorded by Ibn Ishaq, the prophet's earliest biographer; Islamists see his example as another justification for beheading.⁶ Third, the use of extreme violence in holy war is promoted by Abu Bakr Naji in his Islamist text that is known to have been studied by both the leaders and foot soldiers of IS.⁷ Naji says that holy war involves "naught but violence, crudeness, terrorism, frightening [others] and massacring. ... We need to massacre (others) and (to take) actions like those that were undertaken against the Banu Qurayza and their like."⁸

In July 2015, twenty-five Syrian soldiers were shot in the head by twenty-five of IS's child soldiers at Palmyra, Syria; in volume 8 of *Dabiq*, child soldiers are pictured with guns in their hands as they stand in front of dead bodies. The article says that the prisoners in the accompanying picture had been killed by the child soldiers because they were Russian and Israeli agents. The use of children is justified, the magazine argues, because Muhammad used child soldiers at the Battle of Badr.⁹

Sexual Slavery and Rape

Apart from Jews and Christians, who share with Muslims a belief in common descent from the ancient monotheistic patriarch, Abraham, Middle Eastern religious groups with origins unrelated to Abrahamic tradition have become special targets of IS brutality. Prominent among those are the Yazidis, members of a faith with ancient roots in Zoroastrianism, another monotheistic religion that originated before the birth of Christ. At least seven hundred of its men have been executed and thousands of its women taken into slavery. In an article in *Dabiq*, the author justifies the actions of IS by referring to what is known as the Quranic "sword verse" (9:5, quoted above).¹⁰ The author further argues that because the Yazidi religion is categorized as an apostate faith (one whose members have turned away from Islam), Muslim law lays down that men must be killed and women taken into slavery. To justify his position, he quotes numerous traditions concerning Muhammad: the prophet is reported to have said that "Allah marvels at people who enter *jannah* [paradise] in chains"; and also that it is good to put people in chains until they convert to Islam.¹¹ Other sayings of the

Slave Prices in the Islamic State

According to Sangwon Yoon, "Islamic State Circulates Sex Slave Price List," Bloomberg.com website, 3 August 2015,

"A senior United Nations official says Islamic State is circulating a slave price list for captured women and children, and that the group's ongoing appeal and barbarity pose an unprecedented challenge.

"The official, Zainab Bangura, said that on a trip to Iraq in April she was given a copy of an Islamic State pamphlet, which included the list [see figure on next page], showing that captured children as young as one fetch the highest price. The bidders include both the group's own fighters and wealthy Middle Easterners.

"The list shows the group's view of the value of those it captures ... , though its authenticity came under question. Bangura, who is the UN special envoy on sexual violence in conflict ... , said she has verified that the document came from Islamic State and reflects real transactions.

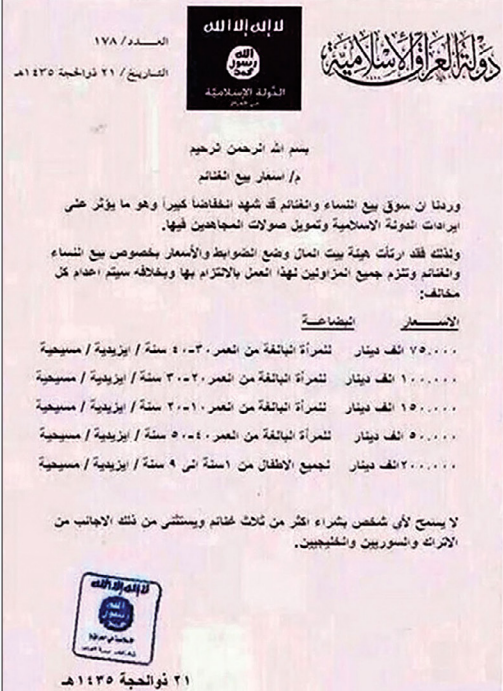
"The girls get peddled like barrels of petrol,' she said in an interview last week in New York. 'One girl can be sold and bought by five or six different men. Sometimes these fighters sell the girls back to their families for thousands of dollars of ransom.'

"For Islamic State fighters, the prices in Iraqi dinars for boys and girls aged 1 to 9 are equal to about \$165, Bangura said. Prices for adolescent girls are \$124, and it's less for women over 20."



(MEMRI Jihad & Terrorism Threat Monitor)

"Questions and Answers on Taking Captives and Slaves," distributed by the Islamic State in late 2014.



A translated version of the document (left) was shared online by humanitarian and peace prize winner Dr. Widad Akrawi, and reads as follows:

We have received news that the demand in Women and Cattle market has sharply decreased and that will affect Islamic State revenues as well as the funding of mujahideen in the battlefield, therefore we have made some changes. Below are the prices for Yazidi and Christian women.

The price for Yazidi or Christian women between the age of 40 - 50 is \$43 (£27)

\$75 (£48) for 30 to 40-year-olds

\$86 (£55) for 20 to 30 year-olds

\$130 (£83) for ten to 20-year-olds

\$172 (£110) for one to nine-year-olds

Customers are allowed to purchase only three items with the exception of customers from Turkey, Syria and Gulf countries.

Dated and sealed by ISIS in Iraq 16 October 2014.

Information courtesy of: Dr. Widad Akrawi, Twitter post, 4 November 2014, 4:11 a.m., <https://twitter.com/DrWidadA/status/529576654709198848>.

Figure. The Islamic State's Price List for Yazidi and Christian Slaves

prophet are quoted that say that when slave girls give birth to their masters the day of judgment is not far off. In addition to using *hadiths* (words attributed to the prophet Muhammad), other Muslim authorities are also quoted to justify the enslaving of women.¹²

But what about the raping of women who are taken into slavery? Umm Sumayyah al-Muhajirah (a female member of IS) writes an article in which she argues that using slave girls as sexual slaves is acceptable because of four texts in the Quran and the example of the prophet Muhammad. One of the Quranic text says, "The believers have prospered ... and ... those who guard their private parts. Except from their wives and what their right hands possess" (23:1-6). The verse refers to men "guarding their private parts" except when they are with their wives and with women captured in war. The inference is, therefore, that men may have sexual relations with women taken captive in war in the same way that they may have sexual relations with their wives. Muhammad is said to have had four slave girls. His companions reputedly followed the same practice: al-Muhajirah says that there was not one of his companions who failed to practice *saby* (taking slaves in war). Indeed, she says, Abi Ibn Ali Talib had nineteen slave girls. A hadith says,

"Approaching any married woman is fornication, except for a woman who has been enslaved."¹³ Al-Muhajirah concludes that the practice of *saby*, which includes what we can only describe as rape, "is a great prophetic sunnah containing many divine wisdoms and religious benefits."¹⁴ One of its benefits, she says, is that slaves will be able to accept Islam and enter paradise.

Justification for Burning Captives Alive

In volume 7 of *Dabiq*, there is a full-page photo of a Jordanian pilot being burned to death in a cage; a few pages later there is a half-page picture of his charred remains. Lt. Mu'adh al-Kasasibah was captured in 2014 after his plane crashed in Syria. *Dabiq* argues that his burning was entirely justified: "In burning the crusader pilot and burying him under a pile of debris, the Islamic State carried out a just form of retaliation for his involvement in the crusader bombing campaign which continues to result in the killing of countless Muslims who, as a result of these airstrikes, are burned alive under mountains of debris."¹⁵ The author of the article is aware of the hadith which states that only God can punish with fire but argues that



(Image from UNTV)

Nadia Murad BaseTaha, a twenty-one-year-old Iraqi woman of the Yazidi faith and a victim of abduction for purposes of sex slavery by the Islamic State, speaks 16 December 2015 at the United Nations Security Council meeting on human trafficking in situations of conflict.

this stipulation is abrogated in the case of retaliation in accordance with a verse in the Quran (2:194). He notes that Muhammad himself on one occasion gouged out his enemies' eyes with a heated iron, and that there were a number of occasions on which the prophet's companions also punished their enemies by burning them; he cites five separate examples. Thus, he argues, in burning the Jordanian pilot IS was simply following the example of Muhammad and his companions.

Scriptural and Historical Precedents

Throughout IS's mouthpiece, *Dabiq* contributors justify what can only be described as the organization's acts of depravity and inhumanity by citing texts from the Quran, the sayings and deeds of Muhammad and, occasionally, by referring to events in Islamic history—particularly to events surrounding the prophet's companions. (As previously mentioned, fundamentalist groups take the founding days of a faith as normative and authoritative in addition to its holy texts.) Articles that aim to justify events and practices are always well argued, often containing numerous quotations from the Quran and multiple hadiths. Where there is room for debate because of conflicting texts or sayings, there will be a careful and detailed

analysis. The magazine, which is always very professionally produced, contains numerous photographs of prisoners—particularly as they are about to face execution or, occasionally, of the executions themselves. It also includes pictures of dead bodies—usually of those who have been executed but sometimes of Syrian and Iraqis killed as a result of airstrikes.

Using Islamic texts and traditions, the magazine calls upon Muslims everywhere to migrate to Iraq and Syria to become members of the *khalifate* (Muslim state). Those who are unable to join are encouraged to undertake jihad in their own countries. "If you can kill a disbelieving American or European—especially the spiteful and filthy French—or an Australian, or a Canadian, or any other disbeliever from the disbelievers waging war, including the citizens of the countries that entered into a coalition against the Islamic State, then rely upon Allah, and kill him in any manner or way however it may be ... Kill the disbeliever whether he is civilian or military, for they have the same ruling."¹⁶

Is It Really Islamic?

Many Muslims around the globe are keen to distance themselves from the philosophy and actions of

IS. Following the massacre in Paris in November 2015, Qari Asim, imam of the Makkah mosque in Leeds, UK, placed the following message on his mosque's website: "ISIS or IS neither speak for Islam nor is their poisonous ideology shared by Muslims across the globe. Once again, British Muslims unfortunately find ourselves in a position of having to publicly disassociate ourselves with the actions of a despicable group of individuals who have hijacked our religion of peace for their own political and territorial goals. Their actions are an absolute affront to Islam and are unequivocally condemned by Muslims throughout the globe."¹⁷ His exasperation is palpable.

In the book of Deuteronomy, one of the first five books of the Christian and Jewish bibles, Jews are commanded by God to kill everyone in a city in time of war; they are told to kill all the men but to take the women, children, and animals for themselves.¹⁸ Irrespective of such scriptural exhortations, very few in the Jewish (or Christian) community today would regard this biblical injunction as being God's instructions for the conduct of modern warfare. Based upon the primitive culture and local customs of the time, such actions were undoubtedly regarded then as appropriate and acceptable, but are not seen as relevant in the twenty-first century among most nations of the world today that have roots in Judeo-Christian religious traditions. In fact, such actions would be almost universally regarded as repulsive.

In response to IS's reputedly Islamic justification for its grisly actions, many Muslims are putting forward a similar rejectionist argument with regard to some of the more violent texts in the Quran and hadith; that such are now anachronistic and inappropriate if the Islamic world is to progress forward in step with modern humanistic values.

For example, in the United Kingdom, a group of imams have published their own online magazine, *Haqiqah* (reality), which aims to undermine the arguments offered by IS. The argument they offer is that if Muslims look at the Quran and hadith in a wider

context rather than taking selective verses and sayings out of context they will realize that their faith offers a very different perspective. Musharraf al Azhari concludes, "Our struggle [jihad] in today's world should be for the establishment of peace, to establish goodness and kindness between others, to engage in dialogue, and to truly work on the protection and improvement of our souls."¹⁹ The authors note that rather than prescribing the persecution of people of other faiths, the Quran allows freedom of religion.²⁰

Elsewhere, Tariq Ramadan, professor of Islamic Studies at Oxford University, argues that Muslims should use the Quran and sunnah as a whole to derive universal Muslim principles; the precise rules and regulations which are contained in them are purely relative to the time in which they were written. Faithfulness to principles should not involve literal faithfulness in applying individual texts because societies change. In every age there has to be discussion on how the basic underlying principles of the religion should be applied. As Ramadan puts it, "the concern should not be to dress as the Prophet dressed but to dress according to the principles (of decency, cleanliness, simplicity, aesthetics, and modesty) that underlay his choice of clothes."²¹

A Singaporean Muslim posted the following on his Facebook page after the Paris attacks of November 2015: "ISIS [Islamic State of Iraq and Syria] is Islam's biggest enemy, not the U.S., not Israel or France or Germany or the Russians. We have to own the problem. We have to admit that this is a religious problem."²²

Conclusion

Bombing IS in Iraq and Syria may be the right thing to do now, but it cannot be the only thing that is needed; the conflict ultimately is one of deeply entrenched ideology. That ideological war is one that must be fought and, as many Muslims are now saying, one that must be won from within Islam itself.²³ Those of us who are not Muslims must support them in the conflict. ■

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Notes

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MR We Recommend



The George Washington University report "ISIS in America: From Retweets to Raqqa," by Lorenzo Vidino and Seamus Hughes, is a valuable resource for those interested in researching the threat to the United States posed by radical Islamists and the Islamic State. The report examines cases of Americans involved in ISIS-related activities, and provides a demographic analysis of those charged with ISIS-related crimes. It goes on to discuss the individual motivations of ISIS supporters, how they became radicalized, the role of the Internet and social media in their radicalization and recruitment processes, and how involved U.S.-based ISIS sympathizers actually are with that terrorist organization. Finally, the report provides recommendations on how to combat ISIS recruitment. Find the full report at <http://cchs.gwu.edu/isis-in-america>.