

# **The Islamic State: A Political-Religious Totalitarian Regime**

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## **Abstract**

This paper explores the Islamic State's form of government as a political-religious totalitarian regime. This new classification is derived from an in-depth analysis of the State's revolutionary transformation from a group of radicalized Sunni Muslims into an entirely unique, organized, and global terrorist organization with a totalitarian foundation. The State utilizes common totalitarian tropes in its agenda and ideology, practice of total control, recruitment, destruction of history, and symbolism. Furthermore, analysis and translation of the ideological view of the writings by political theorists Dostoevsky, Hoffer, and Arendt expand on these tropes, providing additional support for the State's classification as a political-religious totalitarian regime. Because of the Islamic State's status as a global threat, both defining and understanding this new classification are essential; however, in order to know how to address this threat, it must first be understood.

Over the past ten years, the media has been dominated by discussion surrounding the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) as a revolutionary radical Islamic force that presents a global threat to democracy. While not completely incorrect, this depiction fails to present a comprehensive perspective by excluding the mass movement, religious indoctrination, and political ideology of ISIS or, as it is now known, the Islamic State. The State is unique in its ability to unify religion and politics to establish a strong totalitarian state, making clear the emergence of a new type of government—the political-religious totalitarian regime.

In order to evaluate the current practices and predict the future movements of any political regime, one must first look to the foundation from which it emerged. For the Islamic State, this involves a centuries old conflict between Shia and Sunni Muslims. The Shia-Sunni divide occurred after the death of the prophet Muhammad in 632 A.D. when dispute arose over who should be his successor (Salamah, 1991). The Sunnis held that Muhammad did not have a rightful heir, so the next leader should be elected. The Sunnis chose Abu Bakr to succeed Muhammad (Salamah, 1991). The Shia differed, believing that only Allah can choose the leader so all successors must be descendants of Muhammad's family (Salamah, 1991). This religious, ideological divide was the primary reason for hostility towards the leaders put forth by each group, and with the instilment of a Shia leader in Iraq, the disenfranchised Sunnis felt "denied any role in the new Iraq" (Griffin, 2016, p. 1). As a result of being systematically "dismissed from their jobs in the armed forces, intelligence agencies and broad sectors of the civilian administration," nearly half a million Sunnis were left with nothing (Griffin, 2016, p. 1). Many of the rejected Sunnis were trained for combat and began to seek retribution, aiming to restore the balance of power all while unknowingly creating the foundation for a future, radicalized mass movement (Gerges, 2018).

The formation of the Islamic State was marked by constant evolution through the divergence from various terrorist cells. The pivotal separation that directly led to the creation of the Islamic State was guided by Jordanian-born radical Islamist Abu Musab al-Zarqawi when he decided to leave the Osama bin Laden directed al-Qaeda terrorist group (Auerbach, n.d.). Zarqawi fled to Iraq from Afghanistan, where he intended to create a new organization that followed the lines of radicalized Sunni Islam primarily opposed to Shia Muslims (Auerbach, n.d.). The group unified themselves under the name, AQI or al-Qaeda in Iraq (Auerbach, n.d.) Soon after, Zarqawi was killed in a United States directed airstrike in 2006, yet his group lived on, rebranded as The Islamic State of Iraq (ISI). The ISI continued to primarily target Shia Muslims until the "anti-government demonstrations and uprisings" known as Arab Spring began in the 2010s

(Arab Spring, 2020, p. 1). These uprisings were in response to “economic stresses, societal changes, and entrenched[,] corrupt[,] and repressive rule” (Arab Spring, 2020, p. 1). In 2011, Syrian President Bashar al-Assad resorted to violent measures in order to suppress the citizen uprising; however, the ISI joined the uprising, supporting the revolutionaries and declaring a new name change, identifying themselves as the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) (Auerbach, n.d.; Gerges, 2016). In 2014, the new ISIS leader, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, declared the regions of northern Iraq and eastern Syria to be a caliphate, a state based upon Islamic law, abbreviating the name to Islamic State (IS) (Auerbach, n.d.). Naming himself caliph—the leader of the state—Baghdadi asserted that all Muslim communities should recognize the regime as the “one true Islamic State,” using violence to demonstrate what would happen to those who directly opposed or failed to conform to the ideologies of the caliphate (Auerbach, n.d., p. 3).

### **The Islamic State as a Totalitarian Regime**

#### **Agenda and Ideology**

All government operations, regardless of whether they are totalitarian, authoritarian, tyrannical, or democratic in nature, have agendas and specific ideologies. The roots of the Islamic State lay in Islam and the concept of Jihadi-Salafism. This 21<sup>st</sup>-century branch of Sunni Islamic political thought emphasizes the activism of the Muslim Brotherhood, which stresses the “development of an Islamic social order” in the form of a caliphate (Brookings Institution, 2015, 6:50-7:30; *The Oxford Dictionary of Islam*, 2003, p. 306). Today, the Islamic State embraces the most violent, extreme traits of Jihadi-Salafism (Brookings Institution, 2015).

Throughout history, some regimes have held nationalist ideals, while other have taken on a more globalist perspective. Mussolini’s Italy displayed an extremist view of nationalism with a fascist government and an exaggerated importance on nationalist symbols (Warnes, 2019). Under this form of government, absolute submission to the state is demanded, and individuals are prohibited from questioning their leader (Warnes, 2019). Therefore, the focus is on the individuals within the state and not on invasion of Ethiopia. On the other hand, Nazi Germany took a globalist approach. Likewise, the state demanded absolute loyalty, but expansion was the ultimate goal. While nationalism and globalism are fundamentally different, they are not entirely independent of one another.

The Islamic State embodied a unique combination of both a nationalist and globalist approach. Al-Qaeda leader Osama bin Laden believed in the “far enemy” of the United States and the Western world, but Islamic State founder Zarqawi believed in the “near enemy” of Arab regimes. Ultimately, the idea of the “real enemy” resulted in the main reason why Zarqawi split from al-Qaeda (Griffin, 2016, p. 9). According to Griffin

(2016), the US invasion of Iraq was theoretically:

an opportunity to engage the near and the far enemy simultaneously, so ending any doctrinal dispute between the two leaders, but al-Zarqawi's campaign of assassinations, kidnappings and bomb attacks against civilians conflicted with Al Qaeda's strict non-aggression pact with non-Sunni actors. . . (13)

Zarqawi wanted first to conquer the Arab World, displaying a form of religious nationalism, and then shift focus towards establishing a global caliphate, maintaining an international "total war" (Marsico, 2016, p. 30; Gerges, 2018, p. 91).

### ***Total War***

In order for Zarqawi to accomplish establishing a worldwide caliphate, there first needed to be "religious and ethnic cleansings" primarily of the Yazidis, Kurds, and Shia in the Arab region because of their devout opposition to the radical Sunni Islam embodied in the Islamic State (Gerges, 2018, p. 91). The quest to establish a "pure Islamic State" was not home to a single, designated enemy; rather, everyone and anyone could be ruled an enemy (Griffin, 2016, p. 16). From the perspective of the caliph, the State came first, and the "fifth column" needed to be eliminated (Marsico, 2016, p. 17). In *The Plot Against America*, Roth (2014) delves into the idea of a "fifth column," which is a group of people who align with the beliefs of an enemy, undermining the objectives of their nation, meaning anyone who opposed the state, either publicly or privately, is a threat to the nation, an idea that the Islamic State transformed from the world of theory into reality. Therefore, the State would not hesitate to remove those who stood in its way. Often, extremists did not simply target oppositional military personnel; they "threatened, persecuted, and killed ordinary civilians" as part of their "total war" (Gerges, 2018; Marsico, 2016, p. 36).

### ***Maintaining Control***

The Islamic State utilized various methods to maintain control. First, the State met the basic needs of its followers, creating false feelings of safety and security, which is further explained by Dostoevsky's (1879-1880/1994) Theory of Miracle, Mystery, and Authority. Second, the State maintained recruitment by appealing to outcasts of society (Hoffer, 1951). Finally, the use of intimidation practices such as public humiliation and/or execution allowed the State to ensure compliance (Mello, 2018).

### ***Theory of Miracle, Mystery, and Authority***

According to Dostoevsky (1879-1880/1994), successful control by a regime extends beyond military force and simple fear. Following Dostoevsky's (1879-1880/1994) Theory of Miracle, Mystery, and Authority from "The Grand Inquisitor," the state must oversee the well-being of its loyalists in order to maintain control. In this theory, Dostoevsky (1879-1880/1994) holds that, if a state provides miracles (food) and mystery

(entertainment), people are more likely to be willing subjects to absolute authority; people would rather be amused and satisfied subjects of the state than be free and starving. This is further upheld by Hoffer (1951) who explains that humankind is drawn to mass movements because of the solidarity held among combatants.

In *The True Believer: Thoughts on the Nature of Mass Movements*, Hoffer (1951) delves into the psychology of the appeal of mass movement politics. He claims that it is the “undesirables” of society who are likely to be recruited by a mass movement (Hoffer, 1951). These individuals are searching for something beyond themselves. Mass movement leaders target those who believe that there is something wrong in their life due to the status quo of society, who are poor and see this as an opportunity for advancement, who desire a new avenue of self-expression, and who are selfish or unselfish (Hoffer, 1951). In whole, these people groups view a mass movement as a way to disassociate from personal responsibility (Hoffer, 1951). While vastly different groups with varying circumstances, they are all in search of something, and the mass movement provides an answer, as seen in the Theory of Miracle, Mystery, and Authority (Dostoevsky, 1879-1880/1994; Hoffer, 1951).

Like Dostoevsky and Hoffer, Arendt (1994) agrees that mass movements often target lonely, isolated people. In *Origins of Totalitarianism*, she presents her explanation of how control is achieved and maintained, arguing that the primary goal of a totalitarian leader is to control the thinking of their citizens and subjects. Under this form of government, absolute unity is essential, and the state will brag about crimes and grotesque accomplishments to maintain order and loyalty, essentially scaring its subjects into submission (Arendt, 1994). Furthermore, a totalitarian regime will always find new opposition, even if it is innocent people, as this ensures preservation through continual conflict and conquering (Arendt, 1994). While Dostoevsky and Arendt have some slightly different perspectives on how a totalitarian regime is created and maintained, they both maintain the idea of complete control through blatant manipulation, a concept mastered by the Islamic State.

Turning the theoretical ponderings of Dostoevsky, Hoffer, and Arendt into real-world application, the Islamic State has displayed miracles through the artificial image of being a provider by offering “internal security” and “food and medical treatment” (Naji, 2003, p. 42). The State’s idea of “educational outreach” aimed to reinforce the idea that by “complying with the Islamic State, individuals will be liberated” because “following [the State’s] rules provides residents...with security stability, and financial resources” unavailable otherwise (Mello, 2018, p. 149). Additionally, the Islamic State provided entertainment through broadcasted violent propaganda, satisfying humankind’s craving

for mystery and spectacle (Dostoevsky, 1879-1880/1994). Finally, the Islamic State recognized and exploited a need for unity in their recruitment by advertising the State as a unified home for the disenfranchised individuals of the world (Arendt, 1994; Dostoevsky, 1879-1880/1994; Hoffer, 1951). This application of the Miracle, Mystery, and Authority theory is further emphasized by the radicalized religious ideology of the State.

### ***Religious Extremism and Policing***

The Islamic State achieved and maintained absolute authority in the same basic pattern as regimes past; however, at the core of the State is radicalized religion. Under a system of Islamic extremism, the caliph exercises “total religious and political authority over his subjects’ lives,” and his power supersedes even basic human rights (Marsico, 2016, p. 9). Utilizing both the establishment of an institution and implementing “strategies of survival,” the Islamic State strove to transform the Middle East into its “ideological image” through the formation of a caliphate (Mello, 2018, p. 147; Auerbach, n.d., p. 2).

While the Islamic State does not utilize secret police, a common practice among totalitarian regimes, it does utilize religious ideological indoctrination levied by a religious police force that enforces “everyday social practices that reflect the Islamic State’s version of Salafism” (Mello, 2018, p. 149). Under Stalin’s Russia, there was systematic surveillance, arrest, and interrogation of political enemies of the state as seen in the infamous Show Trials (Koestler, 1941). The Islamic State mirrors this method in its public “trial and execution” of military prisoners (Mello, 2018).

### **Recruitment**

At the core of any thriving organization is a successful recruiting process. The State’s recruitment methods reveal three additional aspects of the Islamic State that took it beyond a mere radical Islamic movement and aligned it with the typical attributes of a totalitarian regime. Specifically, the State’s use of social media, sectarianism and the Takfiri Doctrine, and impatience has set it apart.

### ***Social Media***

The Islamic State was innovative regarding the use of media to record, propagate, and broadcast violence (Mello, 2018). The video productions are “designed to attract viewers” while simultaneously instilling fear (Mello, 2018, p. 141). Just as Hitler revolutionized film and news-based propaganda in World War II, the Islamic State utilized social media to broadcast propaganda based upon the idea that crude violence creates a “shock and awe” factor that reinforces “an image of power and invincibility” of the State (Mello, 2018, p. 143). The exploitation of public executions was about “restoring, in the eyes of those who witness the punishment of the body of the condemned, the awesome power of the state” and reinforcing the ever present “power of political authority” (Mello, 2018, p. 144).

The violent propaganda, delivered unilaterally through the expansive reach of social media, served to terrorize enemies while simultaneously impressing potential recruits on a global scale by presenting the organization as a “powerful vanguard movement capable of delivering victory and salvation” to its faithful ones (Gerges, 2018, pp. 91, 93). The disenfranchised individuals who joined did not abhor its brutality; rather, it is what attracted them. Both Muslims and non-Muslims living in Western countries join extremist groups like the State because it provides them with a sense of “tight-knit community with a potent identity” (Gerges, 2018, p. 93). Additionally, the goal of erecting a global caliphate provides recruits with a “sense of serving a sacred mission” providing the idea that they are a part of something much bigger than themselves (Gerges, 2018, p. 93).

### ***Sectarianism and the Takfiri Doctrine***

In addition to broadcasted violent propaganda, the Islamic State resurrected the concept of sectarianism, which is civil war among two or more factions of the Islamic faith that actively seek “to remake borders (and by extension the state system) throughout the entire Middle East and beyond” (Mello, 2018, p. 139; *The Oxford Dictionary of Islam*, 2003, pp. 282). The State justified their actions through a broad application of the Takfiri Doctrine which rationalized the “sanctioning [of] violence against leaders of Islamic States who [were] deemed insufficiently religious” (*The Oxford Dictionary of Islam*, 2003, p. 312). Thus, the sectarian war was systematically aimed to target other non-Muslim religious groups and force conversion or death more than any other Islamic extremist organization (Mello, 2018). The idea of a sectarian war was linked to impatience. The State leaders were discontent with the current historical timeline and wanted to quicken the “return of Islamic greatness” or Salafist jihadism through more “open and widespread action” in the form of warfare (Mello, 2018, p. 141).

### ***Religion and Global Mobilization***

The State utilized the age of the internet and employed a strategy, similar to that described by Hoffer, of selling a better future through belittling the present by villainizing the status quo to recruit foreign militants (Hoffer, 1951). The combination of a broadcasted sectarian war and the desire to fast forward time to a fully established global caliphate accelerated this need for combatants. Followers of the Islamic State displayed “value-related rationality more than goal-oriented,” showing that the ideology of the State was “steeped in a messianic, end-of-days version of Sunni Islam that manifested itself without parallel in Middle East history” (Mello, 2018, p. 40). They held a futuristic ideology believing that they could accelerate the “final confrontation that [would] restore Islamic greatness” (Mello, 2018, p. 140). This shows how the Islamic state was able to convert religious appeal into a tangible, politically-based recruitment strategy.

Although the State recruited from across the globe, the majority came from the countries of Tunisia, Saudi Arabia, Russia, Turkey, and Jordan (Auerbach, n.d.). At the most powerful point in its history, the Islamic State maintained approximately 40,000 combatants in Syria and Iraq, 25,000 of which were foreign militants (Auerbach, n.d.). It was the State's violence that allowed it to "forge a new collective identity premised on the power of Sunni Muslims to remake the Middle East, to rid the region of Western and heretical influences, and to restore the Islamic Middle East to its once great heights" (Mello, 2018, p. 153). This further explains why their recruitment was unprecedented and why their methods vary widely in comparison to former, radical Islamic movements (Mello, 2018). The promise of political greatness, tied with religious fervor, is irresistible to disenfranchised youth across the globe. The Islamic State's use of religion enhanced the potency of its ideology, allowing unrivaled mobilization of its masses.

### **Destruction of History**

Along with intense, global propaganda, the Islamic State followed other trademark totalitarian moves throughout its operation. The State attempted to destroy history, and it was successful on occasion. They targeted historical sites of non-Sunni heritage, destroying anything resembling idol worship no matter if it be Christian, Jewish, Shia, etc. in nature (Gerges, 2018). It can be argued that this advanced the ideological war; by eliminating monuments of the past, the State focused attention to its vision of the future—a global caliphate.

### **Symbols**

The Islamic State utilized symbols, which are a key element of fascism used to promote unity. One of these symbols is the State's flag. The writing on the upper portion of the black banner stated the shahada, or the declaration of faith, saying, "There is no god but God, Muhammad is the messenger of God" (Marsico, 2016, p. 31)—a fundamentally religious phrase was thus transformed into a political weapon. The shahada is found on multiple flags throughout Islamic nations, and many Muslims have objected to the idea that this phrase represents radical jihadist movement (Marsico, 2016). However, the symbolism has been so effective that even opponents of the State recognize the transformation of the shahada into a symbol for their enemies, much as the swastika was transformed from a Hindu symbol of peace into a Nazi symbol of hatred (Goldmeier, 2018).

Another symbol of the Islamic State is the orange jumpsuit, which symbolizes the State's resistance of Western intervention in the Islamic lands (Richey & Edwards, 2019). In Western culture, the orange jumpsuit is a common representation of incarceration, but to the State, it symbolizes the "humiliation and dehumanization. . . [which is] forced on [their] prisoners to visually display the group's control over them" (Richey &

Edwards, 2019, p. 168). The uniform is most notably featured in the propaganda videos produced by the State (Richey & Edwards, 2019). Therefore, to the Western world, the once forgettable orange jumpsuit has now become synonymous with the idea of religious extremism and executions.

### **The Islamic State as a Political-Religious Totalitarian Regime**

How did one man from Al-Qaeda begin a movement that was 40,000 strong in barely 10 years (Marsico, 2016)? The answer lies in the creation of a political-religious totalitarian regime. Traditional totalitarian motifs such as propaganda and sectarianism appeared, but the incorporation of religion into political symbolism, police control, and core ideology established an unprecedented power base for the Islamic State. The Islamic State's evolution into a dominant force was so effective that the world deemed a military response was necessary to stem the tide of the growing regime. The Islamic State continued to increase its territorial domain until 2016 when international opponents were able to stall the growth and even reclaim large sections of land (Gerges, 2018). By 2018, the group had "lost control of virtually all its former holding," leading the United States to claim that the State had been vanquished, "but most experts warned that it remains a dangerous force capable of significant terrorist violence" (Gerges, 2018, pp. 3-4; Browne, 2018). In all, this claim of victory was idealistic and inherently flawed.

Rationally speaking, a movement based in religious ideology can never truly be extinguished because the "leader" of the faction is believed by followers to be all powerful and therefore cannot be defeated. In fact, former leader al-Baghdadi asserted that the State will "remain, as long as [they] have a vein pumping or an eye blinking. . . It remains, and [they] will not compromise nor give up. . . until [they] die" (Marsico, 2016, p. 28). As explained by the Pentagon, Islamic State fighters still remain, and the State "is well positioned to rebuild and work on enabling its physical caliphate to re-emerge" (Browne, 2018). Furthermore, recent events confirm the idea that the State will not be stopped (Arraf & Hassan, 2021).

As of January 2021, the United States is still combating Islamic State insurgents despite the fact that the State now has no physical territory (Arraf & Hassan, 2021). With the help of Iraqi intelligence and military support, the American forces conducted an airstrike, killing a prominent Islamic State leader and nine other combatants, in retaliation for the ISIS attack on a market in Baghdad in 2019 that resulted in 32 casualties and injured over 100 people (Arraf & Hassan, 2021; Diaz & Fordham, 2021). After claiming responsibility for the attack, the State reemphasized their target—Shiite Muslims and the Iraqi forces that stood in their way—confirming, yet again, that the Islamic State's religious political totalitarian ideals have and will remain (Arraf & Hassan, 2021).

### **Conclusion**

The Islamic State was a revolutionary form of totalitarianism. It maintained the basic totalitarian foundation by mobilizing a disenfranchised population, establishing a supreme ideology, disseminating violent propaganda, controlling citizens through fear, creating unifying symbols, and destroying history. However, ISIS was unique in the incorporation of religion at a state level. The State did not ideologically align with a known totalitarian regime such as Communist Stalinist Russia or Fascist Nazi Germany. Instead, the State merged religious dogma and state control together to create a *political-religious totalitarian regime* that was not bound by physical borders. It held the same demands as a traditional totalitarian state, but it did so through a political-religious lens, shifting the focus of loyalty from a limited, mortal leader to loyalty to an omniscient, immortal higher power. Bullets can kill a man, bombs can kill a government, but religious zeal does not fall quite so easily.

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