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Do-it-Yourself Islam? Views on the Religious Credibility of the Islamic State

The so-called Islamic State's radical interpretation of Islam enjoys little support among leading Sunni and Salafist preachers, observe Erwin van Veen and Iba Abdo. At the same time, you shouldn't expect these religious leaders to help stem the tide of disaffected Muslims making their way to IS strongholds in Iraq and Syria.

By Erwin van Veen and Iba Abdo for ISN

The Islamic State (IS) has spent the past few months making its interpretation of the Islamic faith as clear to the world as possible. Through its proclamations, actions and professional media campaigns, the group has drawn stark boundaries of inclusion and exclusion in which adherence to its version of Islam is the overriding criterion for 'citizenship' in its Caliphate. The most recent spate of graphic videos shows that the price for being on the wrong side of this divide is death and destruction.

Accordingly, the IS attempts to position itself as the only legitimate source and authority of a radical and [conservative](#) interpretation of Islam that rests on four key components: 1) the elevation of the Quran, the Prophet and the four 'rightly guided' caliphs as the only sources of religious guidance; 2) a literal understanding of their sayings and actions; 3) the enforcement of these strictures without mercy; and 4) imposing them on others, with violence if necessary.

As a result, the IS's long-term success and sustainability would seem to rest in part on the credibility of its interpretation of Islam, the extent to which it resonates with Sunni adherents to the faith and their acceptance of its claim of religious authority. This begs a couple of questions: to what extent does the Islamic State's interpretation of Islam tie in with those of pre-eminent Sunni religious leaders and Salafist preachers? Indeed, what does making such comparisons tell us about the religious credibility of IS' senior figures?

The Saudi Line

A number of public statements made between March 2012 and October 2014 suggest that the Grand-Mufti of Saudi Arabia, Abdelaziz Ben Abdallah al-Sheikh, did not directly condemn the actions of the Islamic State, but focused instead on calling on youth to refrain from joining jihadist groups in general. This only began to change in August 2014 after he branded extremists as '[evil persons and factions](#)' and the IS as '[enemy number one of Islam](#)'. Both instances occurred well after IS's occupation of Mosul in June 2014. His slowness of response earned a public [reprimand](#) by the then King of Saudi Arabia, in which he described the country's sheikhs and muftis as 'lazy and silent' in

their condemnation of radical Islamist groups. However, the Grand Mufti's public statements until August 2014 did not seek to substantively dispute or delegitimize the main religious tenets of the IS specifically.

Indeed, the chronology of the Grand-Mufti's statements must be interpreted in the context of the historical religious-political alliance between Muhammad ibn ÊAbd al-Wahhab (the founder of Wahhabism) and Muhammad bin Saud on which rule in Saudi Arabia is grounded. If the Grand-Mufti is considered as the present-day representative of the Wahhabi side of this alliance, he can alternatively be seen as a religious extension of royal power, a very senior civil servant on the government payroll, or a long-time ally of the Saudi royal family. This helps to reinforce an apparent double bind that echoes through the Grand-Mufti public remarks concerning the IS.

The issue here is that a number of Saudi scholars and writers, such as Adel al-Kalbani (former imam of the King Khaled mosque in Riyadh), Abdallah al-Maliki and Mansour al-Hajla have pointed to the similarities that exist between the ideological foundations of the IS and [Wahhabi](#) versions of Islam. And because the legitimacy of the Saudi state derives in part from its Wahhabi alliance, this fuels perceptions that decades of Saudi sponsorship of Wahhabism has contributed to the rise of the IS. It also helps to explain why the Grand-Mufti avoided direct references to the organization until it became no longer tenable (i.e. after Saudi Arabia joined the anti-IS coalition) and why he has made little effort to discuss the substance of its interpretation of Islam: doing so risks highlighting uncomfortable commonalities. Consequently, the Grand-Mufti's statements largely represent a negative branding and procedural rejection of IS' religious credentials without much by way of supporting arguments.

The View from Egypt

In contrast with his Saudi counterpart, the Grand-Mufti of Egypt, Shawki Ibrahim Allam, made much more of an effort to delegitimize the religious tenets of the IS between June 2014 and November 2014 – when Egypt's domestic power struggle had come to an end. For example, he denounced the demolition of the Yunus shrine at Mosul by referring to the tolerance that the Prophet preached throughout his life. The Grand-Mufti has also disputed the legal basis that the IS provided for making Christians pay 'protection money'. More importantly, he has emphasized on at least two occasions that he has created an observatory at the Dar al-Itfaa educational institute that monitors and responds to extremist Islamic rulings ('fatwas') on the basis of religious jurisprudence and accepted methods of interpretation (see for example its substantive rejection of IS's interpretation of Islam [here](#)).

However, what unites both Grand-Muftis is that their respective criticisms of IS' religious credentials are unlikely to enjoy much impact beyond Saudi Arabia and Egypt. That's because the IS can easily portray both of them to the wider Muslim community as extensions of corrupt tribal royalty or military dictatorship. The Saudi Grand-Mufti is appointed by the Saudi King by royal decree, while his Egyptian counterpart is elected by the Council of Senior Scholars of Al-Azhar, an organization that was established in 2012 by the Egyptian council of ministers. These arrangements provide the IS with good opportunities to push believers towards more radical and less regulated religious institutions – much like its own.

Beyond traditional authority

What is more surprising perhaps, is that many influential Salafist preachers share the Grand-Muftis' opinion that the IS's religious interpretation of Islam leaves a lot to be desired. This has been accompanied by a general condemnation of the brutality of the organization's (now well-documented) methods. This includes the [heavy-handedness](#) that the IS applies to Muslim communities under its

jurisdiction, its killing of innocent people (including Muslims) and loose application of takfir (excommunication on the pain of death), which are all regarded as overly radical ('ghulaat') and un-Islamic. In response, some of these preachers, including the Egyptian Mohammed Hassan and the Syrian Adnaan al-Arouf, have been threatened or attacked by IS militants.

Unlike the Grand-Muftis, the Salafist preachers often have millions of followers on Twitter and other social media websites. This suggests that their condemnation of the IS is more likely to resonate with Muslims than any proclamation coming out of Saudi Arabia or Egypt. Yet, while many of these preachers are vocal in their condemnation of the IS, they are nevertheless also largely in favor of jihad - albeit tempered by religious discipline. Preachers like Kuwait's Shafi al-Ajami and Saudi Arabia's Mohsen al-Awaji initially seemed to cautiously promote the war in Syria, but later changed their stance because of IS's practices, its political abuse of jihad and the alleged involvement of foreign intelligence services. There are also preachers, including Shafi al-Ajami and Yiad Qenaiby, that are clear supporters of Al-Qaida affiliate Jabhat al-Nusra. Finally, many of these Salafist preachers - most prominently the Jordanian Abu Mohammed al-Makdisi - have at times voiced strong opposition to the international alliance against IS. Al-Makdisi, for example, has gone as far as describing it a '[crusader's campaign](#)' - irrespective of his anti-IS stance.

Yet, despite its best efforts, the IS has consistently [failed](#) to gain either the endorsement or the practical support of these and more traditional leading figures in the Sunni religious establishment. That is potentially problematic for a movement that is lacking in religious credibility. From what is known about IS' most senior religious figureheads, such as Othman al-Razih, Abu Usama al-Kahtani, Husam Naji Shnein and Turki Bin Ali, it is likely that some hold relevant degrees on matters such as Islamic jurisprudence. Beyond this, however, there is very little evidence to suggest that any of them have occupied significant positions of religious authority. In addition, the few available [accounts](#) of hostages that have survived IS captivity suggest the religious veneer of the IS is thin and rests to an appreciable extent on political or self-interpretation of Islam.

It is evident that a 'battle for interpretation' of Sunni Islam is in full swing and that clear front lines exist between the traditional Sunni religious establishment, radical Islamist groups and influential Salafist preachers. It's also clear that the IS's interpretation of Islam enjoys little support amongst many Salafist preachers and traditional Sunni religious leaders. But the fact that many Sunni youths are still joining the ranks of the IS reinforces the notion that their views do not necessarily discourage them. This is in part because the poor socio-economic prospects that many in the [Middle East](#) continue to face - as consistently flagged by a [series](#) of Arab Development Reports - must also be taken into account. The same could be said of feelings of marginalization, identity struggles and the challenging economic conditions for a number of Muslims in those Western countries that are home to sizeable communities. Such factors make it unlikely that the West will be able to capitalize upon the broad rejection of the IS' religious 'ideology' by leading Sunni figures.

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