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Issue Brief

Why the Daesh are not the 'Islamic State'

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February 24, 2016

The Islamic State is one of the most lethal and successful militant groups in modern history, surpassing even al-Qaeda. Thousands of its followers have marched across Syria and Iraq, subjugating millions, enslaving women and beheading captives. Thousands more have spread terror beyond the Middle East under the Islamic State's black flag.

The rise of this group in Iraq and Syria has been a disaster for the public image of Islam – and a boon for the Islamophobia industry. After all, this is a group that claims it is the Islamic State; that claims the support of Islamic texts to justify its medieval punishments, and has a leader with a PhD in Islamic studies who declares himself to be a “caliph”, or ruler over all Muslims.

Names are significant because their impact can be compelling. Names are how people expect to see you. By referring to this group as the 'Islamic State' they gain legitimacy where none should exist. Hence, with this in mind, UN Secretary General Ban Ki-moon labelled them ‘the enemies of faith’ and stated that since they in no way represented Islam or a state, they should be referred to as “Un-Islamic Non-State”. What is worrisome is that it is not just ill-informed, ignorant or bigoted members of the public who take such a view. Grame Wood, author of the widely read report ‘What ISIS really wants’ states, “The reality is that the Islamic State is Islamic...*Very Islamic*...the religion preached by its most ardent followers derives from coherent and even learned interpretations of Islam”. Bernard Haykel of Princeton University, voiced similar thoughts and described Muslims who considered ISIS to be un-Islamic, or anti-Islamic, as “embarrassed and politically correct, with a cotton-candy view of their own religion.”

However, these views have been fiercely argued. The Daesh are using religion to advance their political vision. To give themselves a legitimate stronghold, they are using Islam as their justification. Forensic psychiatrist Marc Sageman rightly points out, “It’s not about religion, it’s about identity...you don’t have the most religious folks going there.” Daesh fighters from the West, in particular, “tend to have rediscovered Islam as teenagers or as converts”; they are angry, or even bored, young men in search of a call to arms and a thrilling cause. An example is the Daesh executioner known as “Jihadi John”, raised and educated in the UK and described, by British medics as “quiet but a bit of an adrenalin junkie”.

Perhaps the most astonishing achievement of ISIS has been not the sheer size of the territory Daesh has captured, but the way in which it has united the world’s disparate 1.6 billion Muslims against it. Whether Sunni or Shia, Salafi or Sufi, conservative or liberal, Muslims leaders have almost unanimously condemned and denounced this group not merely as un-Islamic but labelled it anti-Islamic. The various statements of Muslim groups such as the Organisation of Islamic Co-operation, the Islamic Society of

North America, al-Azhar University in Cairo, the most prestigious seat of learning in the Sunni Muslim world; and even Saudi Arabia's Salafist Grand Mufti, Abdul Aziz al ash-Sheikh, have all stated that this group has nothing to do with Islam, is acting "under the guise of this holy religion . . . in an attempt to export their false Islam", and, is in fact "the number-one enemy of Islam". In September 2014, more than 120 Islamic scholars co-signed an 18-page open letter to Baghdadi, written in Arabic, which contained a "technical point-by-point criticism of ISIS's actions and ideology based on the Quran and classical religious texts".

Legitimacy "comes through endorsement by religious leaders. If Sunni Islam's leaders consider ISIS inauthentic, then that is what it is", says Abdal Hakim Murad, who is based at the University of Cambridge and is one of the well-respected western theologians in the world. He continues: "Just as Christianity in Bosnia 20 years ago was not properly represented by the church going militias of Radovan Karadzic and just as Judaism is not represented by West Bank settlers who burn mosques, so, too, Islam is not represented by ISIS."

The French government has been referring to ISIS as "Daesh" for some time. Since September 2014 it has been official French policy to use "Daesh" to refer to the group. The country's former foreign minister Laurent Fabius also asked journalists to use the phrase saying that the other acronyms used for the terror group "blur the lines between Islam, Muslims and Islamists".

Last year, a group of 120 MPs called on the British Broadcasting Network (BBC) to stop referring to the militants as "Islamic State", arguing that they are neither Islamic nor a state. Tory MP Rehman Chishti said the BBC's use of the word Islamic to describe a group that has murdered thousands of innocent people would offend Muslims. London Mayor Boris Johnson and the former Scottish first minister Alex Salmond were also among the MPs to sign an open letter to the BBC in protest at the terminology, while David Cameron has said he is "happy for people to use Daesh". In December 2015 Cameron announced that his government would be joining France in calling the group "Daesh" rather than "ISIL".

It is vital to acknowledge that extremism of any kind cannot be associated with a particular people or religion. Thus, it is important that xenophobia be curbed. New partnerships need to be built between all faiths and creeds. Simultaneously, the root causes of violent extremism should be addressed and eliminated. These include lack of proper institutions, unavailability of provision of justice, economic destitution, and civil wars among other things. To claim that the Daesh is Islamic is egregiously counterfactual, implausible and downright insulting to the 1.6 billion¹ non-violent followers of Islam

across the globe. Above all, it is dangerous and akin to self-defeat, as it provides Baghdadi and his followers with tools for further propaganda and recruitment- something which they most covet.

Notes and References:

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- ¹ Pew Research Center, "Muslims and Islam: Key findings in the U.S. and around the world", December 7, 2015. <http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2015/12/07/muslims-and-islam-key-findings-in-the-u-s-and-around-the-world/>