Mehdi Hasan: How Islamic is Islamic State?

NS newstatesman.com/world-affairs/2015/03/mehdi-hasan-how-islamic-islamic-state

It is difficult to forget the names, or the images, of James Foley, Steven Sotloff, David Haines, Alan Henning and Peter Kassig. The barbaric beheadings between August and November 2014, in cold blood and on camera, of these five jumpsuit-clad western hostages by the self-styled Islamic State, or Isis, provoked widespread outrage and condemnation.

However, we should also remember the name of Didier François, a French journalist who was held by Isis in Syria for ten months before being released in April 2014. François has since given us a rare insight into life inside what the *Atlantic*'s Graeme Wood, in a recent report for the magazine, has called the "hermit kingdom" of Isis, where "few have gone . . . and returned". And it is an insight that threatens to turn the conventional wisdom about the world's most fearsome terrorist organisation on its head.

"There was never really discussion about texts," the French journalist told CNN's Christiane Amanpour last month, referring to his captors. "It was not a religious discussion. It was a political discussion."

According to François, “It was more hammering what they were believing than teaching us about the Quran. Because it has nothing to do with the Quran.” And the former hostage revealed to a startled Amanpour: “We didn’t even have the Quran. They didn’t want even to give us a Quran.”

The rise of Isis in Iraq and Syria has been a disaster for the public image of Islam – and a boon for the Islamophobia industry. Here, after all, is a group that calls itself Islamic State; that claims the support of Islamic texts to justify its medieval punishments, from the stoning of adulterers to the amputation of the hands of thieves; and that has a leader with a PhD in Islamic studies who declares himself to be a “caliph”, or ruler over all Muslims, and has even renamed himself in honour of the first Muslim caliph, Abu Bakr.

The consequences are, perhaps, as expected. In September 2014, a Zogby poll found that only 27 per cent of Americans had a favourable view of Islam – down from 35 per cent in 2010. By February 2015, more than a quarter of Americans (27 per cent) were telling the pollsters LifeWay Research that they believed that life under Isis rule “gives a true indication of what an Islamic society looks like”.

Yet what is much more worrying is that it isn’t just ill-informed, ignorant or bigoted members of the public who take such a view. “The reality is that the Islamic State is Islamic. *Very* Islamic,” wrote Wood in his widely read 10,000-word cover report (“What Isis really wants”) in the March issue of *Atlantic*, in which he argued, “The religion preached by its most ardent followers derives from coherent and even learned interpretations of Islam.”

Bernard Haykel of Princeton University, the only scholar of Islam whom Wood bothered to interview, 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”, and declared that the hand-choppers and throat-slitters of Isis “have just as much legitimacy” as any other Muslims, because Islam is “what Muslims do and how they interpret their texts”.

Many other analysts across the political spectrum agree and have denounced the Obama administration for refusing, in the words of the journalist-turned-terrorism-expert Peter Bergen, to make “the connection between Islamist

terrorism and ultra-fundamentalist forms of Islam". Writing on the CNN website in February, Bergen declared, "Isis may be a perversion of Islam, but Islamic it is."

"Will it take the end of the world for Obama to recognise Isis as 'Islamic'?" screamed a headline on the Daily Beast website in the same month. "Which will come first, flying cars and vacations to Mars, or a simple acknowledgment that beliefs guide behaviour and that certain religious ideas – jihad, martyrdom, blasphemy, apostasy – reliably lead to oppression and murder?" asked Sam Harris, the neuroscientist and high priest of the "New Atheism" movement.

So, is Isis a recognisably "Islamic" movement? Are Isis recruits motivated by religious fervour and faith?

The Analyst

"Our exploration of the intuitive psychologist's shortcomings must start with his general tendency to overestimate the importance of personal or dispositional factors relative to environmental influences," wrote the American social anthropologist Lee Ross in 1977.

It was Ross who coined the phrase "fundamental attribution error", which refers to the phenomenon in which we place excessive emphasis on internal motivations to explain the behaviour of others, in any given situation, rather than considering the relevant external factors.

Nowhere is the fundamental attribution error more prevalent, suggests the forensic psychiatrist Marc Sageman, than in our navel-gazing analysis of wannabe terrorists and what does or doesn't motivate them. "You attribute other people's behaviour to internal motivations but your own to circumstances. 'They're attacking us and therefore we have to attack them.'" Yet, he tells me, we rarely do the reverse.

Few experts have done more to try to understand the mindset of the young men and women who aspire to join the blood-drenched ranks of groups such as Isis and al-Qaeda than Sageman. And few can match his qualifications, credentials or background. The 61-year-old, Polish-born psychiatrist and academic is a former CIA operations officer who was based in Pakistan in the

late 1980s. There he worked closely with the Afghan mujahedin. He has since advised the New York City Police Department on counterterrorism issues, testified in front of the 9/11 Commission in Washington, DC, and, in his acclaimed works *Understanding Terror Networks* and *Leaderless Jihad*, closely analysed the biographies of several hundred terrorists.

Does he see religion as a useful analytical prism through which to view the rise of Isis and the process by which thousands of young people arrive in Syria and Iraq, ready to fight and die for the group?

“Religion has a role but it is a role of justification,” he tells me. “It’s not why they do this [or] why young people go there.”

Isis members, he says, are using religion to advance a political vision, rather than using politics to advance a religious vision. “To give themselves a bit more legitimacy, they use Islam as their justification. It’s not about religion, it’s about identity . . . You identify with the victims, [with] the guys being killed by your enemies.”

For converts to Islam in particular, he adds, “Identity is important to them. They have . . . invested a lot of their own efforts and identity to become this ‘Muslim’ and, because of this, identity is so important to them. They see other Muslims being slaughtered [and say], ‘I need to protect my community.’” (A recent study found that converts to Islam were involved in 31 per cent of Muslim terrorism convictions in the UK between 2001 and 2010.)

Sageman believes that it isn’t religious faith but, rather, a “sense of emotional and moral outrage” at what they see on their television screens or on YouTube that propels people from Portsmouth to Peshawar, from Berlin to Beirut, to head for war zones and to sign up for the so-called jihad. Today, he notes archly, “Orwell would be [considered as foreign fighter like] a jihadi,” referring to the writer’s involvement in the anti-fascist campaign during the Spanish civil war.

Religion, according to this view, plays a role not as a driver of behaviour but as a vehicle for outrage and, crucially, a marker of identity. Religion is important in the sense that it happens to “define your identity”, Sageman says, and not because you are “more pious than anybody else”. He invokes the political scientist Benedict Anderson’s conception of a nation state as an

“imagined political community”, arguing that the “imagined community of Muslims” is what drives the terrorists, the allure of being members of – and defenders of – the ultimate “in-group”.

“You don’t have the most religious folks going there,” he points out. Isis 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. The Isis executioner Mohammed Emwazi, also known as “Jihadi John” – who was raised and educated in the UK – was described, for instance, by two British medics who met him at a Syrian hospital as “quiet but a bit of an adrenalin junkie”.

Sageman’s viewpoint should not really surprise us. Writing in his 2011 book *The Black Banners: the Inside Story of 9/11 and the War Against al-Qaeda*, the Lebanese-American former FBI agent Ali H Soufan, who led the bureau’s pre-9/11 investigation into al-Qaeda, observed: “When I first began interrogating al-Qaeda members, I found that while they could quote Bin Laden’s sayings by heart, I knew far more of the Quran than they did – and in fact some barely knew classical Arabic, the language of both the *hadith* and the Quran. An understanding of their thought process and the limits of their knowledge enabled me and my colleagues to use their claimed piousness against them.”

Three years earlier, in 2008, a classified briefing note on radicalisation, prepared by MI5’s behavioural science unit, was obtained by the *Guardian*. It revealed: “Far from being religious zealots, a large number of those involved in terrorism do not practise their faith regularly. Many lack religious literacy and could . . . be regarded as religious novices.” The MI5 analysts noted the disproportionate number of converts and the high propensity for “drug-taking, drinking alcohol and visiting prostitutes”. The newspaper claimed they concluded, “A well-established religious identity actually protects against violent radicalisation.”

As I have pointed out on these pages before, Mohammed Ahmed and Yusuf Sarwar, the two young British Muslim men from Birmingham who were convicted on terrorism charges in 2014 after travelling to fight in Syria, bought copies of *Islam for Dummies* and *The Koran for Dummies* from Amazon prior to their departure. Religious novices, indeed.

Sageman, the former CIA officer, says we have to locate terrorism and

extremism in local conflicts rather than in grand or sweeping ideological narratives – the grievances and the anger come first, he argues, followed by the convenient and self-serving ideological justifications. For example, he says, the origins of Isis as a terror group lie not in this or that Islamic book or school of thought, but in the "slaughter of Sunnis in Iraq". He reminds me how, in April 2013, when there was a peaceful Sunni demonstration asking the Shia-led Maliki government in Baghdad to reapportion to the various provinces what the government was getting in oil revenues, Iraqi security forces shot into the crowds. "That was the start of this [current] insurrection."

A pro-Isis demonstration in Mosul, Iraq, in June 2014. Photo: Associated Press

Before that, it was the brutal, US-led occupation, under which Iraq became ground zero for suicide bombers from across the region and spurred the creation of new terrorist organisations, such as al-Qaeda in Iraq (AQI).

Isis is the "remnant" of AQI, Sageman adds. He believes that any analysis of the group and of the ongoing violence and chaos in Iraq that doesn't take into account the long period of war, torture, occupation and sectarian cleansing is inadequate – and a convenient way of exonerating the west of any responsibility. "Without the invasion of Iraq, [Isis] would not exist. We created it by our presence there."

The Spy

Like Marc Sageman, Richard Barrett has devoted his professional life to understanding terrorism, extremism and radicalisation. The silver-haired 65-year-old was the director of global counterterrorism operations for MI6, both before and after the 11 September 2001 attacks, and he subsequently led the al-Qaeda and Taliban monitoring team at the United Nations between 2004 and 2013.

Unlike Sageman, however, Barrett partly sympathises with Graeme Wood's and Bernard Haykel's thesis that "the Islamic State is Islamic". He tells me that some Isis followers "are clearly convinced they are following Allah's will" and he insists: "We should not underestimate the extent of their belief." However, Barrett concedes that such beliefs and views "will not be the only thing that drew them to the Islamic State".

The former MI6 officer, who recently published a report on foreign fighters in Syria, agrees with the ex-CIA man on the key issue of what motivates young men to join – and fight for – groups such as Isis in the first place. Rather than religious faith, it has "mostly to do with the search for identity . . . coupled with a search for belonging and purpose. The Islamic State offers all that and empowers the individual within a collective. It does not judge and accepts all with no concern about their past. This can be very appealing for people who think that they washed up on the wrong shore."

Whether they are unemployed losers or well-educated professionals, joining Isis offers new recruits the chance to "believe that they are special . . . that they are part of something that is new, secret and powerful".

While Barrett doesn't dismiss the theological angle in the way that Sageman does, he nevertheless acknowledges, "Acting in the name of Islam means that, for the ignorant at least, the groups have some legitimacy for their actions . . . They can pretend it is not just about power and money."

This irreligious lust for power and money is a significant and often overlooked part of the Isis equation. The group – often described as messianic and uncompromising – had no qualms about demanding a $200m ransom for the lives of two Japanese hostages in January; nor has it desisted

from smuggling pornography into and out of Iraq, according to Louise Shelley, director of the Terrorism, Transnational Crime and Corruption Centre at George Mason University in Virginia. (Shelley has referred to Isis as a “diversified criminal operation”.)

Then there is the often-ignored alliance at the heart of Isis between the so-called violent Islamists, led by Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, and the remnants of Saddam Hussein’s secular Ba’athist regime – an alliance that Barrett has referred to as a “marriage of convenience”. If Isis is the apocalyptic religious cult that Wood and others believe it is, why was Baghdadi’s deputy in Iraq Abu Muslim al-Afari al-Turkmani, a former senior special forces officer in Hussein’s army? Why is Baghdadi’s number two in Syria Abu Ali al-Anbari, a former major general under Hussein?

“The Ba’athist element was certainly very important . . . as it gave the Islamic State military and administrative capability,” Barrett says. “It also made it possible [for Isis to] take Mosul so quickly and cause defections and surrenders from the Iraqi army. There was and continues to be a coincidence of interest between Islamic State and other anti-government Sunni groups.”

Here again, it seems, is the fundamental attribution error in play. We neglect to focus on the “interests” of groups such as Isis and obsess over their supposedly messianic and apocalyptic “beliefs”. The “end of times” strain may be very strong in Isis, Barrett warns, but: “The Ba’athist elements are still key in Iraq and without them the Islamic State would probably not be able to hold on to the city of Mosul.”

Baghdadi’s appointment as leader of Isis in 2010 was orchestrated by a former Ba’athist colonel in Hussein’s army, Haji Bakr, according to another recent study produced by Barrett, in which he noted how Bakr had “initially attracted criticism from fellow members of the group for his lack of a proper beard and lax observance of other dictates of their religious practice”. Nevertheless, pragmatism trumped ideology as Bakr’s “organisational skills . . . and network of fellow ex-Ba’athists made him a valuable resource” for Isis.

Apparently, Baghdadi’s supposed caliphate in Iraq and Syria was less the will of God and more the will of Saddam.

The Theologian

Perhaps the most astonishing achievement of Isis has been not the sheer size of the territory it has captured, but the way in which it has united the world's disparate (and often divided) 1.6 billion Muslims against it.

Whether Sunni or Shia, Salafi or Sufi, conservative or liberal, Muslims – and Muslim leaders – have almost unanimously condemned and denounced Isis not merely as un-Islamic but actively anti-Islamic.

Consider the various statements of Muslim groups such as the Organisation of Islamic Co-operation, representing 57 countries (Isis has "nothing to do with Islam"); the Islamic Society of North America (Isis's actions are "in no way representative of what Islam actually teaches"); al-Azhar University in Cairo, the most prestigious seat of learning in the Sunni Muslim world (Isis is acting "under the guise of this holy religion . . . in an attempt to export their false Islam"); and even Saudi Arabia's Salafist Grand Mufti, Abdul Aziz al ash-Sheikh (Isis is "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, containing what the Slate website's Filipa Ioannou described as a "technical point-by-point criticism of Isis's actions and ideology based on the Quran and classical religious texts".

Yet buffoonish right-wingers such as the Fox News host Sean Hannity continue to refer to the alleged "silence of Muslims" over the actions of Isis and ask, "Where are the Muslim leaders?" Meanwhile, academics who should know better, such as Princeton's Bernard Haykel, insist that the leaders of Isis "have just as much legitimacy as anyone else".

Legitimacy, however, "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 teaches Islamic studies at Cambridge University and serves as the dean of the Cambridge Muslim College, which trains imams for British mosques. The blond-haired, 54-year-old Murad is a convert and is also known as Timothy Winter (his brother is the *Telegraph* football writer Henry). Murad has been described by the Royal Islamic Strategic Studies Centre in Jordan as "one of the most well-respected western theologians", whose "accomplishments place him amongst the most significant Muslims in the world".

The religious world, whether Muslim, Jewish or Christian, is “packed with fringe and fundamentalist groups that claim the mantle of total authenticity”, Murad tells me. To accept those groups’ assertions at face value is “either naive or tendentious”.

He continues: “Just as Christianity in Bosnia 20 years ago was not properly represented by the churchgoing 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.”

Contrary to a lazy conventional wisdom which suggests that a 1,400-year-old faith with more than a billion adherents has no hierarchy, “Islam has its leadership, its universities, its muftis and its academies, which unanimously repudiate Isis,” Murad explains. For the likes of Haykel to claim that the Isis interpretation of Islam has “just as much legitimacy” as the mainstream view, he adds, is “unscholarly”, “incendiary” and likely to “raise prejudice and comfort the far-right political formations”.

As for Isis’s obsession with beheadings, crucifixions, hand-chopping and the rest, Murad argues: “With regard to classical sharia punishments, the religion’s teachings in every age are determined by scholarly consensus on the meaning of the complex scriptural texts” – rather than by self-appointed “sharia councils” in the midst of conflict zones.

Many analysts have laid the blame for violent extremism among Muslims at the ideological door of Salafism, a regressive and ultra-conservative brand of Islam, which owes a great deal to the controversial teachings of an 18th-century preacher named Muhammad Ibn Abd al-Wahhab and which today tends to be behind much of the misogyny and sectarianism in the Muslim-majority world. Yet, as even Wood concedes in his *Atlantic* report, “Most Salafis are not jihadists and most adhere to sects that reject the Islamic State.”

Salafists tend to be apolitical, whereas groups such as Isis are intensely political. Even the traditionalist Murad, who has little time for what he has deemed the “cult-like universe of the Salafist mindset”, agrees that the rise of

extremism within the movement is a consequence, rather than a cause, of violence and conflict.

“The roots of Isis have been located in rage against . . . the 2003 occupation of Iraq. Before that event, Salafist extremism was hardly heard of in Syria and Iraq, even though the mosques were full in those countries,” Murad says. “Angry men, often having suffered in US detention, have reached for the narrowest and most violent interpretation of their religion they can find. This is a psychological reaction, not a faithful adherence to classical Muslim norms of jurisprudence.”

In the view of this particular Muslim theologian, Isis owes a “debt to European far-right thinking”. The group’s “imposition of a monolithic reading of the huge and hugely complex founding literature of the religion is something very new in Islamic civilisation, representing a totalitarian impulse that seems closer to European fascism than to classical Islamic norms”.

The Radical

Raised in Toronto, the son of Indian immigrant parents, Mubin Shaikh went from enjoying a hedonistic teenage lifestyle involving drugs, girls and parties to embracing a militant and “jihadist” view of the world, full of hate and anger.

He felt as though he “had become a stranger in my own land, my own home”, Shaikh told PBS in 2007, referring to an identity crisis that helped spark his “jihadi bug”. After 11 September 2001, he wanted to fight in Afghanistan or Chechnya because: “It felt like the right thing to do.”

It is a familiar path, trodden by the likes of Dzhokhar and Tamerlan Tsarnaev, the brothers accused of bombing the Boston Marathon, as well as Chérif and Saïd Kouachi, the *Charlie Hebdo* attackers in Paris. (A former friend of Chérif said that the younger, pot-smoking Kouachi “couldn’t differentiate between Islam and Catholicism” before he became radicalised by “images of American soldiers humiliating Muslims at the Abu Ghraib prison”, as the *New York Times* put it.)

Yet Shaikh eventually relinquished his violent views after studying Sufi Islam in the Middle East and then boldly volunteered with the Canadian Security Intelligence Service to infiltrate several radical groups in Toronto.

The bald and bearded Shaikh, now aged 39 and an adviser to Canadian officials, tells me it is “preposterous” to claim that the killing of Christians and Yazidis by Isis is rooted in Islamic scripture or doctrine. If it was, “Muslims would have been doing those sorts of things for the past 50-plus years. Yet we find no such thing.”

He offers three distinct explanations for why Isis should not be considered or treated as an “Islamic” phenomenon. First, Shaikh argues, “The claim that Isis is ‘Islamic’ because it superficially uses Islamic sources is ridiculous, because the Islamic sources themselves say that those who do so [manifest Islam superficially] are specifically un-Islamic.”

He points to an order issued by the first and original Muslim caliph, Abu Bakr, which declared: “Neither kill a child, women [nor] the elderly . . . When you come upon those who have taken to live in monasteries, leave them alone.”

Takfiris are those who declare other Muslims to be apostates and, for Shaikh, “It is the height of incredulity to suggest that they [members of Isis] are in fact ‘Islamic’ – an opinion shared only by Isis and [Islamophobes] who echo their claims.”

As for Baghdadi’s supposed scholarly credentials, Shaikh jokes, “Even the devil can quote scripture.”

Second, he argues, it is dangerous to grant Isis any kind of theological legitimacy amid efforts to formulate a coherent “countering violent extremism” (CVE) strategy in the west. “It is quite possibly a fatal blow in that regard because, essentially, it is telling Muslims to condemn that which is Islamic.” It is, he says, a “schizophrenic approach to CVE which will never succeed”.

Third, Shaikh reminds me how the former US defence secretary Donald Rumsfeld often included verses from the Bible at the top of the intelligence briefings that he presented to President George W Bush. “Could we say [Iraq]

was a ‘Christianity-motivated war’? How about verses of the Bible [reportedly] engraved on to rifles for use in the Afghanistan and Iraq wars?”

The former radical points out that highlighting only the role of religion in the radicalisation process to the exclusion of, or above, other factors is short-sighted. “Fear, money . . . adventure, alienation and, most certainly, anger at the west for what happened in Iraq . . . [also] explain why people join [Isis],” he tells me.

Shaikh therefore wants a counterterrorism approach focused not merely on faith or theology, but on “political, social and psychological” factors.

The Pollster

What Dalia Mogahed doesn’t know about Muslim public opinion probably isn’t worth knowing. And the former Gallup pollster and co-author, with the US academic John L Esposito, of *Who Speaks for Islam? What a Billion Muslims Really Think*, based on six years of research and 50,000 interviews with Muslims in more than 35 countries, says that the survey evidence is clear: the overwhelming majority of the world’s Muslims reject Isis-style violence.

Gallup polling conducted for Mogahed’s book found, for instance, that 93 per cent of Muslims condemned the terror attacks of 11 September 2001. The 40-year-old Egyptian-American scholar tells me, “In follow-up questions, Gallup found that not a single respondent of the nearly 50,000 interviewed cited a verse from the Quran in defence of terrorism but, rather, religion was only mentioned to explain why 9/11 was immoral.”

The 7 per cent of Muslims who sympathised with the attacks on the twin towers “defended this position entirely with secular political justifications or distorted concepts of ‘reciprocity’, as in: ‘They kill our civilians. We can kill theirs.’”

It is thus empirically unsound to conflate heightened religious belief with greater support for violence. Mogahed, who became the first hijab-wearing Muslim woman to hold a position at the White House when she served on Barack Obama’s advisory council on “faith-based and neighbourhood

partnerships", says that she was "surprised" by the results, as they "flew in the face of everything we were being told and every assumption we were making in our counterterrorism strategy".

As for Haykel's claim that Islam is merely "what Muslims do and how they interpret their texts", Mogahed is scathingly dismissive. "If Islam is indeed 'what Muslims do', then certainly numbers should be a powerful factor dictating which Muslims we see as representing it," she says. "Isis is a tiny minority whose victims are, in fact, mostly other Muslims.

"By what logic would this gang of killers, which has been universally condemned and brutalises Muslims more than anyone else, get to represent the global [Muslim] community?"

The former White House adviser continues: "Any philosophy or ideology, from Christianity to capitalism, has normative principles and authorities that speak to those norms. Each also has deviants who distort it to meet political or other goals. If I deny the existence of Christ but call myself a Christian, I'd be wrong. If I say the state should usurp all private property and redistribute it equally among citizens but call myself a capitalist, I would be wrong. Islam is no different."

Echoing Murad, Mogahed points out, "Islam's authorities have loudly and unanimously declared Isis un-Islamic." Because of this, "Making a claim that violates normative principles of a philosophy, as defined by those with the authority to decide, is illegitimate."

What about Haykel's claim that Isis fighters are constantly quoting Quranic verses and the *hadith*, or traditions from the life of the Prophet, and that they "mug for their cameras and repeat their basic doctrines in formulaic fashion and they do it all the time"? Why do they do that if they don't believe this stuff – if it isn't sincere?

"The Quran [and] *hadith* according to whom?" she responds. "As interpreted by whom? As understood by whom?"

Mogahed, who served as the executive director of the Gallup Centre for Muslim Studies until 2012 and who now works for the Institute for Social Policy and Understanding (ISPU) and runs her own consulting firm based in

Washington DC, argues that Isis uses Islamic language and symbols today for the same reason as Palestinian militant groups used the language of secular Arab nationalism in the 1960s and 1970s.

“Any organisation uses the dominant social medium of its society,” she says. “Today, the dominant social currency in the Arab world is Islam. More than 90 per cent of Arab Muslims say religion is an important part of their daily life, according to Gallup research. Everyone, not just Isis, speaks in Islamic language, from pro-democracy advocates to civil society groups fighting illiteracy.”

For Mogahed, therefore, “a violent reading of the Quran is not leading to political violence. Political violence is leading to a violent reading of the Quran.”

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In a recent despatch from Zarqa in Jordan, birthplace of the late AQI leader Abu Musab al-Zarqawi and “one of the country’s most notorious hotbeds of Islamic radicalism”, *Foreign Policy* magazine’s David Kenner sat down with a group of young, male Isis supporters.

“None of them appeared to be particularly religious,” Kenner noted. “Not once did the conversation turn to matters of faith, and none budged from their seats when the call to prayer sounded. They appeared driven by anger at humiliations big and small – from the police officers who treated them like criminals outside their homes to the massacres of Sunnis in Syria and Iraq – rather than by a detailed exegesis of religious texts.”

It cannot be said often enough: it isn’t the most pious or devout of Muslims who embrace terrorism, or join groups such as Isis. Nor has a raft of studies and surveys uncovered any evidence of a “conveyor belt” that turns people of firm faith into purveyors of violence.

Religion plays little, if any, role in the radicalisation process, as Sageman and countless experts testify. It is an excuse, rather than a reason. Isis is as much the product of political repression, organised crime and a marriage of convenience with secular, power-hungry Ba’athists as it is the result of a perversion of Islamic beliefs and practices. As for Islamic scholars, they

“unanimously repudiate” Isis, to quote Murad, while ordinary Muslims “universally condemn” Baghdadi and his bloodthirsty followers, in the words of Mogahed.

The so-called Islamic State is, therefore, “Islamic” in the way the British National Party is “British” or the Democratic People’s Republic of North Korea (DPRK) is “democratic”. No serious analyst considers the latter two entities to be representative of either Britishness or democracy; few commentators claim that those who join the BNP do so out of a sense of patriotism and nor do they demand that all democrats publicly denounce the DPRK as undemocratic. So why the double standard in relation to the self-styled Islamic State and the religion of Islam? Why the willingness to believe the hype and rhetoric from the spin doctors and propagandists of Isis?

We must be wary of the trap set for us by Baghdadi’s group – a trap that far too many people who should know better have frustratingly fallen for. A former US state department official who has worked on counterterrorism issues tells me how worried he is that the arguments of the *Atlantic*’s Wood, Haykel, Bergen and others have been gaining traction in policymaking circles in recent months. “It was disconcerting to be at [President Obama’s Countering Violent Extremism summit in February] and hear so many people discussing the [*Atlantic*] article while the president and others were trying to marginalise extremist claims to Islamic legitimacy.”

Mogahed is full-square behind her former boss’s decision to delink violent extremism from the Islamic faith in his public pronouncements. “As [Obama] recently remarked, giving groups like Isis religious legitimacy is handing them the ideological victory they desperately desire,” she says. This may be the most significant point of all to understand, as politicians, policymakers and security officials try (and fail) to formulate a coherent response to violent extremism in general and Isis in particular.

To claim that Isis is Islamic is egregiously inaccurate and empirically unsustainable, not to mention insulting to the 1.6 billion non-violent adherents of Islam across the planet. Above all else, it is dangerous and self-defeating, as it provides Baghdadi and his minions with the propaganda prize and recruiting tool that they most crave.

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Read Tom Holland's reply to this essay.