

The End of the Caliphate and Its Consequences for Islamist Recruitment

Robin Simcox

KEY TAKEAWAYS

Even though the ISIS caliphate has now been dismantled, the ideology of Islamism will endure.

Islamism rests upon a politicized interpretation of theology and the weaponization of grievances. These factors will still exist regardless of a caliphate does.

The caliphate is not the primary cause of Islamist ideology but a draw for those already immersed in it.

Today, I will discuss why I believe that while the destruction of the Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham's (ISIS) caliphate was a significant triumph, jihadist recruitment in the West will not be significantly impacted.

Certainly, the destruction of the caliphate in Iraq and Syria was a crucial victory in the fight against extremism in the Middle East. However, it was also a crucial victory for Western interests.

The caliphate was a draw for Westerners who wished to live under sharia law and provided opportunities to receive terrorist training. ISIS-controlled territory was subsequently used to plot an attack that was narrowly avoided in Verviers and atrocities in Paris and Brussels which, tragically, were not.

However, the caliphate was not the primary Islamist cause of radicalization in the first place. Rather, it was a draw for those already immersed in Islamist

This paper, in its entirety, can be found at <http://report.heritage.org/hl1310>

The Heritage Foundation | 214 Massachusetts Avenue, NE | Washington, DC 20002 | (202) 546-4400 | heritage.org

Nothing written here is to be construed as necessarily reflecting the views of The Heritage Foundation or as an attempt to aid or hinder the passage of any bill before Congress.

ideology. Therefore, even though foreign fighter travel will exponentially diminish post-caliphate, that does not mean the threat from violent Islamism is guaranteed to be the same.

Context for Foreign Fighter Travel

Syria is not the first magnet for foreign fighters. They also traveled to conflict zones in Bosnia, Kashmir, Chechnya, Afghanistan, Mali, Iraq, Somalia, Yemen, Libya, and Nigeria in past decades.

The reason why these specific locations emerged was either the existence of ungoverned spaces; a dispute over physical territory; the presence of foreign troops; weak governance and a break down in the rule of law; human rights abuses; the presence of authoritarian rulers; or, on occasion, all of these factors occurring at once.

Depending upon the context, some of these conflict zones areas were easier to access than others. For example, in the 1990s the large number of British citizens with Pakistani heritage—as well as the authorities' more relaxed attitude to the foreign fighter phenomenon—meant that the large number of British citizens with Pakistani heritage traveling to that region did not particularly raise many red flags. This subsequently became an established route from which to enter Afghan training camps or fight jihad there and/or in nearby Kashmir.¹

Similarly, it was easier for individuals from the U.S. Somali community based in Minneapolis to travel to their ancestral homeland without raising suspicion than it was—for example—Iraq. As a consequence, al-Shabaab had success recruiting Americans to fight jihad in the 2007–2008 period.²

On the flipside, while containing burgeoning jihadist movements, countries with weaker links into the West—like Yemen or Mali—were more difficult to access and less appealing to travel to. (Although not impossible: the “underwear bomber,” Umar Farouk Abdulmutallab, received terrorist guidance from Yemen prior to his Christmas Day 2009 plot.)

With the onset of the Arab Spring, new potential foreign fighter destinations emerged. From a Western foreign fighters' perspective, Syria's rebellion was the easiest of the rebellions occurring in the region at the time to join.

As Bashar al-Assad began to crush internal opposition in Syria, foreign fighters flocked to the country. The multitude of flights occurring from European capitals to Istanbul allowed foreign fighters to take a short plane journey and then be spirited over the border by rebel groups waiting at the airport.

Syria became the most significant foreign fighter location for a generation. Almost 6,000 subsequently traveled from Western Europe to fight in the Syrian civil war, many joining ISIS.³ In total, hundreds more came from Canada, Australia, and the U.S.⁴

Social media played a role in this. While some jihadi propaganda hit upon the same themes as previous conflicts—such as images of Muslim suffering—Twitter, Facebook, and the like allowed these images to travel much faster and much further. The days of jihadists using fax machines and sermons on cassette tapes to get their messaging out were consigned to the past.

Therefore, there was a host of practical reasons as to why Syria became the magnet it did. However, the reason why foreign fighter travel exists in the first place is because of a broader ideology: Islamism.

Islamism and Islamist Interpretation of Theology.

Islamism has basic tenets central to its propulsion.⁵

- Islam is not just a religion, it is an all-encompassing socio-political system.
- Sovereignty lies with God, not man.
- The world is divided into *dar al-harb* (the lands of Islam) and *dar al-kufr* (the lands of disbelief).
- There is a requirement to restore a caliphate in which Muslims can live under sharia law, governed by a Caliph, who would serve a religious and political head of Muslim community.

A distinction within this is drawn out by the American scholar Mary Habeck, who states that “[m]ost versions of Islamism believe in political or social processes (using democratic voting processes, or persuasion through preaching, known as *dawa*) to achieve their perfect state. A minority, the jihadists, believe that only through violent jihad can they establish their paradise on earth.”⁶

Regardless, the ideology of Islamism explains why foreign fighter travel occurred in the past and why it will do so again in the future. ISIS’s declaration of a caliphate governed by sharia law was a draw for radicalized individuals who lamented living in a political system where sovereignty lay with man over God. It was for the same reason that Taliban-governed

Afghanistan saw the presence of Westerners in the 1990s: They were claiming to be returning to a ‘pure’ form of Islamic governance.

The theological element animating those aligned with the likes of ISIS and al-Qaeda is sometimes downplayed in academia and the media.

For example, a headline *The Guardian* in January 2019 read that “[b]rain scans show social exclusion creates jihadists,” a story based on University College London research;⁷ nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) still claim that poverty is the root cause of extremism, despite a wealth of evidence to show otherwise.⁸

Meanwhile, a November 2016 Combating Terrorism Center study concluded that “[r]eligiosity is not the strongest explanatory factor” for the foreign fighter phenomenon. A reason given for this was that “[l]ess than 15% of fighters coded by religious background had any formal religious education.”⁹ A United Nations Office of Counter-Terrorism study from August 2017 also downplayed religious factors, concluding that foreign fighters “lack any basic understanding of the true meaning of jihad or even the Islamic faith.”¹⁰

The key rebuttal to this is made by the author Graeme Wood: “They confuse duration of piety for depth of piety; religion for religiosity; and, most tellingly, orthodoxy for belief.”¹¹

There are several reasons why this theological component has been downplayed. It could be a misunderstanding of jihadi motivations, excessive political correctness, or an inability of secular-minded Westerners to accept that—in the 21st century—there are those whose actions are primarily being driven by faith.

However, as George Orwell once said, “to see what is in front of one’s nose is a constant struggle,” and there is much to be learned from listening to what al-Qaeda and ISIS recruits say about why they carry out the acts they do. Undeniably, they often couch their acts in explicitly religious terms.¹² These recruits may not be well-respected religious scholars. However, their actions are grounded in an understanding of religion.

Still, this is only part of the picture. Islamist groups also attract those predisposed to violence.¹³ ISIS’s ideology is an especially attractive draw because this predisposition will be rewarded. For example, ISIS’s interpretation of theology meant that the rape of non-Muslim women is not only permissible but actually a form of worship. ISIS members were known to pray both before and after raping their victims.¹⁴ That this Islamic interpretation may appeal to young, sexually frustrated males predisposed to violence is also no surprise.

Terrorist groups have also had success in recruiting those afflicted by guilt over straying from pure Islam. Aimen Dean, a former member of al-Qaeda who became an informant for British intelligence, has written that

“[i]n too many places Islam has become a religion based on fear of damnation and sin.... [I]mams around the world have responded to globalization and the rise of permissive liberal culture in the West by placing overemphasis on hellfire and damnation.”¹⁵

The consequence of this, Dean says, is that “[t]hey have created a generation of the guilty. Their sermons warn of the torture and torment waiting in the hereafter for those indulging in alcohol, drugs, sex before marriage, and other vices. It is a message of damnation which has driven many young men to martyrdom as a way to atone for their sins.”¹⁶

This is a key reason as to why Westerners have been recruited by ISIS and al-Qaeda in the past and will be recruited by similar groups in the future. Dean points out that “[y]oung Muslims in the West have much greater exposure to such vices than the average teenager in Riyadh or Algiers. And so it follows that their perceived need for redemption is all the greater.”¹⁷ That redemption can take place via the aforementioned acts of violence dressed up as worship to Allah.

This is also a potential reason as to why terrorist groups have been a draw for so many with criminal records. There have been too many petty criminals, small-time thieves and wannabe gangsters drawn into jihadism for it to be a coincidence.

While it does not seem to be because all are overcome with guilt for past behavior, the idea that Islamism offers some form of redemption remains a compelling one.

Historic Humiliation and the Plight of Muslims Today

The idea that the modern Muslim is in a state of perpetual humiliation is also central to the recruitment strategy of Islamist groups.

It was not always the case that Islam could be portrayed in this way. The scholar of Islam, Bernard Lewis, has described how after the end of the Greek and then Rome empires, from around the 8th century “Islam was the leading civilization in the world, marked by its great and powerful kingdoms, its rich and varied industry and commerce, its original and creative sciences and letters.”

However, Lewis goes on, “during the past three centuries, the Islamic world has lost its dominance and its leadership, and has fallen behind both the modern West and the rapidly modernizing Orient.”¹⁸

That has allowed the following issues to all be exploited by recruiters.

The Loss of the Caliphate. In his first video appearance since the 9/11 attacks, Osama bin Laden referred to the “humiliation and disgrace” that

Islam had endured for over eight decades.¹⁹ This was a reference to the defeat of the Ottoman sultanate in 1918, the occupation of Constantinople, and the British and French partitioning its Empire. In 1924, the caliphate was abolished, never to be revived.

The loss of the caliphate is regarded as a tragedy not only by terrorist groups. Even purportedly non-violent groups like Hizb ut-Tahrir ascribe problems that Islam faces today as being down to “its being deprived of political leadership that carries Islam to the entire world, whose leadership all the Muslims would be united under, and whose hand all the sources of strength would be gathered in”: an Islamic state.²⁰

The idea will live on, regardless of the destruction of the caliphate in Iraq and Syria. As Thomas Hegghammer has argued, the notion that there was a glorious caliphate where God’s law was applied, and which Islamists can claim that the Crusaders and Jews overthrew, could even be exploited for future recruitment.²¹

It must be hoped that the crushing nature of ISIS’s military defeat, and testimonies from those who can attest to how corrupt it was, prevents this sense of nostalgia becoming too widespread.

Western Foreign Policy. There is an unending supply of grievances tied to foreign policy, particularly U.S. foreign policy. In its recruitment approach, jihadists have exploited a lack of Western intervention (Bosnia); when the West has intervened (Afghanistan, Iraq, and Libya); and when it has had a more cautious half-in, half-out approach (Somalia, Syria, or Yemen).

That is why, while we must always be careful with our foreign policy choices, there is no prospect for placating Islamists on this subject. The Islamist worldview will always display U.S. policy in the worst possible light, no matter what course is pursued.

Muslims Are Imprisoned or Detained Around the World. From re-education camps for the Uighur in China, to terrorists detained in Guantanamo Bay or the detainees mistreated at Abu Ghraib, the detention of Muslims is used by jihadist groups to foster grievance. Islamist NGOs like the U.K.-based Cage exist primarily to raise awareness of the detention of both convicted terrorists and terror suspects around the world.

Many Muslim-Majority Countries Are Impoverished with Struggling Economies. The economic plight or lack of education in Muslim-majority countries is also referred to by jihadist clerics as part of a broader Islamist narrative. For example, in a video from November 2010 titled, “Do Not Consult Anyone in Killing the Americans,” American Yemeni cleric Anwar al-Awlaki referred to how “[i]n Yemen, poverty is spreading.

Illiteracy is spreading. The tribal collusions, which cause the shedding of Muslim blood, are increasing.”²²

Awlaki’s answer to this was not rooted in job creation or better schools. It was for the Sunnis to unite, revive the spirit of jihad, expel US presence from Yemen and overthrow their rulers.

The Leaders in Muslim-Majority Countries Are Corrupt. Jihadists consider Muslim lands to be ruled by corrupt leaders who have strayed from Islam and are propped up by the U.S. This was why bin Laden emphasized attacking the “far enemy” (the U.S.) rather than the “near enemy” (the authoritarian regimes it sometimes supported). This attitude towards these regimes goes beyond bin Laden: Ayman al-Zawahiri accused Muslim leaders in Saudi Arabia, Jordan, Egypt, and Palestine of being “Zionists” in a July 2010 recording.²³

Israel. Israel still exists, despite the depth of anguish this brings to jihad-ists and their desire to expel Jews from the region. In Bin Laden’s 1996 declaration of war against the U.S., he stated that “I still feel the pain of Al Quds in my internal organs. That loss is like a burning fire in my intestines,” a reference to the loss of Jerusalem to Israel following the Six Day War of 1967 (another incident regarded as a source of humiliation to Islam).²⁴ In 2008, bin Laden again stated that “[w]e will continue, God permitting, the fight against the Israelis and their allies...and will not give up a single inch of Palestine as long as there is one true Muslim on Earth.”²⁵

Islam’s Prophet Is Being Defamed. The notion that Islam is being humiliated is not just restricted to geopolitics but also to what the West regards as basic freedom of speech issues. For example, terrorist attacks have occurred across the world due to cartoons depicting Islam’s Prophet, Mohammed, in an unflattering way.

Some are aimed at a government embassies, such as al-Qaeda’s attack on the Danish embassy in Pakistan in June 2008. Others are aimed at individuals involved in publishing the images, as occurred in January 2015, an al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula operation led to the gunning down of staff members of Charlie Hebdo magazine. The gunmen yelled “we have avenged the Prophet” after their attack.

The Ummah Remains Fractured. Despite all these grievances, the Muslim *ummah*, or community, has not united. This is presented in conspiratorial terms by groups like al-Qaeda. Ayman al-Zawahiri ascribes Bangladeshi desire for independence from Pakistan, for example, not to sovereignty or expelling military rule but “to rip the Muslim Ummah apart into pieces, and lead it to death by getting it entangled in mutual strife, regional conflicts and wars.”²⁶

There are also other areas of potential recruitment, albeit with perhaps less immediate relevance to Westerners.

Sectarian impulses are also relevant in explaining foreign fighter flows. One of the draws for foreign fighters flocking to Syria—particularly in the early part of the conflict—was to protect Sunnis from the tyranny of Bashar al-Assad, an Allawite.

As Iraq struggles to deal with how best to dispense justice to ISIS fighters this could also flare up again in that country. Credible accusations are circulating that it is not just ISIS recruits being jailed and killed on sometimes flimsy evidence but Sunnis in general.²⁷

ISIS, hoping to rebound, will seek to act as defenders of persecuted Sunnis against the Shia—particularly Iran—as they did in the years prior to the declaration of a caliphate.

Conclusion

Therefore, few if any of the factors that draw individuals towards Islamist ideology—from both a theological and political perspective—have diminished.

The caliphate is one of the last destinations for Islamists; it is not the gateway. Unfortunately, elimination of the caliphate does not mean that the threat of Westerners being drawn to the ideology that spawned it is also eliminated. The struggle with Islamism and Islamist terror outfits is far from over.

Robin Simcox is Margaret Thatcher Fellow in the Margaret Thatcher Center for Freedom, of the Kathryn and Shelby Cullom Davis Institute for National Security and Foreign Policy, at The Heritage Foundation.

Endnotes

1. Robin Simcox, Hannah Stuart, and Houriya Ahmed, "Islamist Terrorism: The British Connections," The Centre for Social Cohesion, 2010.
2. Robin Simcox and Emily Dyer, "Al-Qaeda in the United States: A Complete Analysis of Terrorism Offenses," The Henry Jackson Society, 2013.
3. "How Many IS Foreign Fighters Are Left in Iraq and Syria?," BBC News, February 20, 2019, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-47286935> (accessed March 26, 2019).
4. Richard Barrett, "Beyond The Caliphate: Foreign Fighters and the Threat of Returnees," The Soufan Center, 2017, <https://thesoufancenter.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/11/Beyond-the-Caliphate-Foreign-Fighters-and-the-Threat-of-Returnees-TSC-Report-October-2017-v3.pdf> (accessed March 26, 2019), and Alexander Meleagrou-Hitchens, Seamus Hughes, and Bennett Clifford, "The Travelers," George Washington University's Program on Extremism, 2018, <https://extremism.gwu.edu/travelers> (accessed March 26, 2019).
5. A good definition is provided by Hannah Stuart, "Islamist Terrorism: Analysis of Offences and Attacks in the UK (1998-2015)," Henry Jackson Society, 2017, <http://henryjacksonsociety.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/03/Islamist-Terrorism-preview-1.pdf> (accessed March 26, 2019).
6. Mary Habeck, "The U.S. Must Identify Jihadi-Salafists Through Their Ideology, Practices, and Methodology—and Isolate Them," Heritage Foundation *Special Report* No. 200, July 9, 2018, https://www.heritage.org/sites/default/files/2018-07/SR-200_web_0.pdf (accessed March 26, 2019).
7. Mark Townsend, "Brain Scans Show Social Exclusion Creates Jihadists, Researchers Say," *The Guardian*, January 6, 2019, https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2019/jan/06/social-exclusion-radicalisation-brain-scans?fbclid=IwAR3M5BTxbZPLlvjXtkcS1ef_IDtxa4WWhPls_AF9KJ6SNAX5eQ1QddbUyI (accessed March 26, 2019).
8. Darsha Soni, Twitter, February 5, 2019, <https://twitter.com/darshnasoni/status/1092870659779317766> (accessed March 26, 2019).
9. Arie Perliger and Daniel Milton, "From Cradle to Grave: The Lifecycle of Foreign Fighters in Iraq and Syria," Combating Terrorism Center at West Point, 2016, <https://ctc.usma.edu/app/uploads/2016/11/Cradle-to-Grave2.pdf> (accessed March 26, 2019).
10. Lizzie Dearden, "Isis: UN Study Finds Foreign Fighters in Syria 'Lack Basic Understanding of Islam,'" *The Independent*, August 4, 2017, <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/home-news/isis-islamic-state-foreign-fighters-syria-recruits-lack-basic-understanding-of-islam-radicalisation-a7877706.html> (accessed March 26, 2019).
11. Graeme Wood, "What We Still Don't Know About the Islamic State's Foreign Fighters," *The Atlantic*, August 19, 2017, <https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2017/08/isis-foreign-fighters/537279/> (accessed March 26, 2019).
12. For example, Ben Wedeman, "Canadian Women Emerge from ISIS's Crumbling Caliphate," CNN, February 10, 2019, <https://www.cnn.com/2019/02/09/middleeast/canadian-women-isis-syria-wedeman-intl/index.html> (accessed March 26, 2019), and "IS Bride Shamima Begum Full Transcript: 'It Was Nice at First, Like in the Videos,'" Sky News, February 20, 2019, <https://news.sky.com/story/is-bride-shamima-begum-full-transcript-i-did-have-a-good-time-there-11640278> (accessed March 26, 2019).
13. For example, see Aimen Dean's references to those he met in Afghanistan in Aimen Dean, Paul Cruickshank, and Tim Lister, *Nine Lives: My Time as the West's Top Spy inside al-Qaeda* (Oneworld Publications, 2018).
14. Rukmini Callimachi, "ISIS Enshrines a Theology of Rape," *The New York Times*, August 13, 2015, <https://www.nytimes.com/2015/08/14/world/middleeast/isis-enshrines-a-theology-of-rape.html> (accessed March 20, 2019), and Dean et al., *Nine Lives*, p. 390.
15. Dean et al., *Nine Lives*, p. 399.
16. Ibid.
17. Ibid., p. 400.
18. Bernard Lewis, *The Crisis of Islam: Holy War and Unholy Terror*, (Phoenix, 2003), p.xvi.
19. "Text: Bin Laden's Statement," *The Guardian*, October 7, 2001, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2001/oct/07/afghanistan.terrorism15> (accessed March 26, 2019).
20. "The Khilafah Is a Matter of Life or Death for the Ummah and it is the Source of Strength (Translated)," Hizb ut-Tahrir Central Media Office, February 27, 2014, <http://www.hizb-ut-tahrir.info/en/index.php/leaflet/turkey/4141.html> (accessed March 26, 2019).
21. Andrew Anthony, "The Art of Making a Jihadist," *The Guardian*, July 23, 2017, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/jul/23/the-culture-that-makes-a-jihadi-thomas-hegghammer-interview-poetry-militancy> (accessed April 12, 2019).
22. Anwar al-Awlaki, "Do Not Consult Anyone in Killing the Americans," Flashpoint Partners (hosted by Aaron Zelin), November 8, 2010, <https://azelin.files.wordpress.com/2010/11/anwar-al-e28098awlaqi-e2809cto-make-it-known-and-clear-to-mankind-and-not-to-hide-ite2809d.pdf> (accessed March 26, 2019).
23. "Zawahiri Slams Arab Leaders as 'Zionists' in New Tape," AFP, July 23, 2010, https://web.archive.org/web/20100723171440/https://www.google.com/hostednews/afp/article/ALeqM5gX2M8bJ7vElzB_h2NvZXWoi7o2bg (accessed March 26, 2019).
24. Peter Bergen, *The Osama bin Laden I Know: An Oral History of al Qaeda's Leader* (New York: Free Press, 2006), pp. 165–166.

25. Lin Noueihed, "Bin Laden Marks Israel Anniversary with Combat Vow," Reuters, May 16, 2008, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-binladen-israel-idUSL1662611720080516> (accessed March 26, 2019).
26. "Full Text of al-Qaeda Chief Ayman al-Zawahiri's Audio Message," <https://www.thedailystar.net/sites/default/files/upload-2014/gallery/pdf/transcription-zawahiri-msg.pdf> (accessed March 26, 2019).
27. For example, see Ben Taub, "Iraq's Post-ISIS Campaign of Revenge," *The New Yorker*, December 17, 2018, <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2018/12/24/iraqs-post-isis-campaign-of-revenge> (accessed April 18, 2019).