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Thinking Sociologically about Religion and Violence:  
The Case of ISIS

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Several months ago I was invited to speak to a conference of Muslim clergy in the Northern Iraq city of Sulimaniyah. The topic was taqfir—the attitude of absolute spiritual righteousness that regards all who disagree with someone as heretics. What they had in mind was the strident religiosity of the so-called Islamic State, also known as ISIS, the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria, or ISIL, the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (wider Syria), or by its Arabic initials, Daesh—a term that means “bullies,” and for that reason is preferred by those who have been victimized by the movement.

ISIS was not Muslim, the clergy at my conference argued. And they used theological references and Qur’anic proofs to make their points. Whatever it was, I pointed out, ISIS was a movement with extremist religious pretensions. Moreover, the world is full of taqfir in virtually every religious tradition. Since I was speaking shortly after the 2016 presidential election in the United States, I could point to the rise of a strident angry Christian exclusionism during that campaign to make my point. No religion and no part of the world is free from intolerant extremism.

The mullahs in Kurdistan saw ISIS as a theological threat. From their point of view it was theologicially skewed, and could be countered using religious authorities from the Qur’an to Islamic jurisprudence to make their points.

Later that week, following the conference, I went to an area near the city of Mosul where thousands of refugees had just fled the city as it was being liberated by a combination of Iraqi army, Kurdish and tribal militias, and U.S. air support. The Kurdish government in alliance with the United Nations High Commission for Refugees had set up temporary tent cities that was housing tens of thousands of beleaguered former residents of the city. Since the refugees had just been under ISIS rule, they could help me understand what it was like to live under the movement’s regime.

“They follow a strange religion,” one of the refugees told me, saying that whatever the followers of Daesh believed in, it was not Islam as they knew it. To illustrate his point, the refugee told a story about ISIS followers who were questioned about Islam and seemed to know very little about it.

“It is not religion at all,” another former Mosul resident told me, claiming that the movement had no religious interest, but rather that “it was all about political power.” He buttressed his point with stories about people he knew who had joined the movement solely for personal gain—to get a job or received status within a movement that privileged one ethnic community: Arab Sunni Muslims from eastern Syria and western Iraq.

Which of these observations about ISIS—all of them by people who knew the movement close at hand—was correct? Was it a bad interpretation of Islam, no Islam at all but some “strange religion,” or a socio-political movement to achieve power? Or could it have been some mix of all of these perceptions?
This confusion about ISIS is not just a problem for those who are close to the movement or have been affected by it. It’s a problem for scholars and political observers as well—should ISIS be analyzed as a religious or political phenomenon?

Shortly after the rise of ISIS, President Barack Obama joined the chorus of those who denigrated the religious credentials of the movement and said plainly that the Islamic State was neither Islamic nor a state:

“ISIL is not ‘Islamic,’” Obama said, explaining that “no religion condones the killing of innocents, and the vast majority of ISIL’s victims have been Muslim.” President Obama also said that “ISIL is certainly not a state,” since it was “recognized by no government, nor the people it subjugates.”

But other observers disagreed. Writing in The Atlantic about “What ISIS Really Wants,” Graeme Wood, a careful journalist with knowledge of the region and a background in Arabic, explained that the movement was not just “a collection of psychopaths,” but a religious group with a sophisticated theology grounded in the Qur’an and in Muslim tradition. Wood relied heavily on the scholarship of Bernard Haykel, a professor of Near Eastern Studies at Princeton, who said that the movement was trying to faithfully recreate the early days of Islam and faithfully reproduce its norms of war.

This is a theme that was expanded into a book-length study, ISIS Apocalypse, by Will McCants, an Islamic studies scholar attached to the Brookings Institute. Though much of the book is about the history of the evolution of the movement in the insurgency that followed the United States military invasion of Iraq, it does cover extensively the theological elements of the apocalyptic vision stated by leaders of the movement, in which they imagine a catastrophic conflict at the end of times in which the foreigners from the West (from Rumiyah, Rome) would be defeated in battle in the fields outside the town of Dabiq. This explains in part why the movement at the outset captured the town near the northern Syrian border with Turkey, why the movement’s glossy online magazine was named “Dabiq,” and why after the town fell from ISIS control in 2016 the name of the online magazine was changed to “Rumiyah.”

There is no denying that these religious ideas are at the heart of ISIS thinking, at least among the leadership circle of the movement. But how large is that inner circle, and do the great number of followers regard ISIS the same way? Graeme Wood’s article in another magazine, The New Republic, argued that there are several kinds of followers of ISIS, including Sunni Arab pragmatists and foreign soldiers of fortune. Several articles about the international young people who were attracted to the movement as jihadi fighters have indicated that they knew very little about Islamic ideas or ISIS theology before they come to fight in the struggle. One journalist noted that among the possessions of some foreign fighters were copies of Islam for Dummies and The Koran for Dummies that they had picked up to read on the airplane on the way to the frontlines in Syria and Iraq. Among the large contingent of Sunni Arab supporters of the movement in Iraq, as those whom I interviewed in refugee camps have testified, few had much theological knowledge of the movement’s ideas, and most were characterized as “opportunists” rather than as true believers.

It would appear then, that the appeal of the movement was a complicated mixture of factors, in which religion was one element, but only one element. Thomas Hegghammer, a research scholar at the Norwegian Defence Research Establishment in Oslo, who is probably the world’s leading authority on ISIS, describes the main appeal of the movement as its “culture,” rather than its organization or ideology. In an interesting new book edited by Hegghammer, Jihadi Culture, he explores a theme that he has been developing for some time, that movements
such as ISIS should be understood as providing not just an alternative ideology or organization but a socio-cultural way of life. In a 2015 lecture at St. Andrews University in Scotland, “Why Terrorists Weep,” Hegghammer reported on what he had found out about the private lives of ISIS activists—what they did when they were not killing people or organizing terrorist plots—and discovered that they wrote poetry, told jokes, and bonded as a tight community of those committed to a cause. Hegghammer’s point is that what was appealing about ISIS and movements like this was the whole package: the lifestyle and the personal interaction, as much as it was the action and ideas that attract so much public attention.

Does Hegghammer have it right? This is the question that I have posed in my own work on ISIS and movements like it long before the rise of ISIS and long before I became aware of Hegghammer’s interesting observations. Though ISIS is not my sole research focus, I have done interviews with refugees from ISIS and Iraqi leaders from Sunni militants to Shi’a politicians; I have monitored online social media messages from ISIS adherents and followers; and I have tried to understand the history and social context of the movement. It is one of three cases that I am currently examining for a multiyear project on “Resolving Jihadist Conflicts.” I have also included the case of ISIS in the revised, fourth edition of my book, Terror in the Mind of God.

What has become clear to me in my effort to understand the appeal of ISIS is that it is indeed the whole package, the culture and worldview that ISIS offers to those who are attracted to it, even though that culture and its appeal may be perceived differently to different groups.

The Social Origins of ISIS

To make sense of ISIS one has to put it in social and historical context, to understand how it began. It originated in the ferment following the United States military invasion of Iraq in 2003. At that time the overthrow of the Iraqi dictator, Saddam Hussein, was greeted by a certain degree of apprehension among leaders in al Anbar province and other areas of western Iraq where Arab Sunni Muslim communities dominated. They did not mourn Saddam’s demise, a leader of the Association of Muslim Clergy in al Anbar province told me when I interviewed him in Baghdad in 2004, but what they feared was the loss of Sunni power. Even though Saddam’s rule was secular it had favored their own minority Sunni community. In the post-Saddam Iraq the Shi’a majority in the rich river valleys stretching from Baghdad to Basra had begun to claim power and marginalize the Sunnis.

For this reason any movement that promised power to Sunnis in the region was appealing. The Sunni shining knight that appeared on the scene in 2004 was a militant jihadi from Jordan, Abu Musab al-Zarqawi. Born into a refugee Palestinian family, Zarqawi turned to a life of drugs and petty theft in his youth, but later underwent a conversion into a strict form of Islam influenced by the rigid moral codes of the Wahhabi form of Islam prominent in Saudi Arabia. Among other things, it allowed for beheading as an acceptable punishment for those who threatened the faith.

The movement he created in Iraq was based on these teachings and the fears of Sunnis in the western region of the country that they were becoming captive to both American military occupation and Shi’a political domination. He gave them an image of great struggle against these forces that threatened to destroy them and gave them hope for a violent liberation. He named his movement “al Qaeda in Iraq,” thinking me might receive support from the international organization headed by Osama bin Laden and Aymen al Zawahiri, at that time hiding out in Pakistan after the U.S., invasion and occupation of Afghanistan. Relations between Zarqawi and bin Laden were never good, however, since Zarqawi insisted on his own priorities and his own
leadership style. The al Qaeda leaders were uncomfortable with Zarqawi’s extreme anti-Shi’a stance, and his easy adoption of beheading as an intimidating tactic, which bin Laden and Zawahiri thought would alienate the population.

The al Qaeda leaders were right, and though al Qaeda in Iraq flourished for a time with support from young radical Arab Sunnis especially after the U.S. destruction of the city of Fallujah in 2004, the Sunni tribal elders were increasingly wary of Zarqawi’s authoritarian leadership and his rigid Islamic policies. In 2006 Zarqawi was killed by U.S. military forces. The new head of al Qaeda in Iraq was an Egyptian, Abu Ayyub al Masri, who kept the name of al Qaeda but announced that the organization would be creating an Islamic state in the region, headed by an Iraqi Caliph, Abu Omar al-Baghdadi. Al Masri and al Baghdadi were killed by a U.S. military strike in 2010 and their movement turned to another Iraqi as leader; he took the name of the fallen al Baghdadi, naming himself Abu Bakr al Baghdadi. It is this Baghdadi who later proclaimed himself the Caliph of the Islamic State.

For a time, however, the predecessor organization, al Qaeda in Iraq, was defeated. What killed it was hope—the new hope that a political solution could be forged that would give Sunni Arabs a voice, and they didn’t need to rely on the quixotic violet vision promoted by Zarqawi and al Baghdadi. In 2007 under the leadership of U.S. General David Petraeus, U.S. troops were withdrawn from the Sunni regions of western Iraq and local tribal militias were empowered to turn against al Qaeda in Iraq, which eventually restored the region to traditional tribal and religious leadership control. The operation was dubbed the “Awakening.”

This solution worked well while the U.S. was still the occupying force in Iraq, but when the U.S. military withdrew its troops in 2011, the responsibility for maintaining the support of the Sunni tribal leaders fell on the shoulders of al Maliki and the Shi’a dominated government in Baghdad. Alas, al Maliki abandoned the Arab Sunni leaders, choosing to shore up his political support largely from his own Shi’a base by using government funding and positions as payouts to his political supporters. Once again, the Arab Sunnis regarded themselves as marginal and disenfranchised. Their anxiety turned to fear, and their fear turned into paranoid visions of warfare.

This is where al Baghdadi and his Islamic State came back into the picture. The uprising in neighboring Syria that began in 2011 gave him a nearby base of operations as his cadres infiltrated the resistance fighters and built their own jihad army, eventually controlling large sections of Sunni Arab dominated sections of eastern Syria. Their main competition in that battle weary country was another movement affiliated with al Qaeda, the al Nusra Front, with which the al Qaeda leader, Zawahiri, urged al Baghdadi to collaborate. Al Baghdadi was determined to go his own way, however, rejecting al Nusra and the name “al Qaeda,” and proclaiming an Islamic State. In 2014 the movement roared over the borders between Syria and Iraq, and even conquering Iraq’s second largest city, Mosul, which it plundered for its wealth and military armament.

The complicity of the Sunni Arab population in the ISIS administration in Syria and Iraq has been largely opportunistic, not ideological. As I mentioned, the refugees from the Mosul region that I interviewed in 2015 and 2016 told me that the only people in their villages who supported ISIS did so for opportunistic political and economic reasons. Yet they also acknowledged that only ISIS provided a vision of public life in which Sunni Arabs would be accepted. One of the refugees told me bitterly that after escaping ISIS-controlled Ramadi in 2015 he first went to Baghdad, but the hostility of Shi’a in that city against Sunnis like him propelled him northward to the Kurdish region, where I found him living in a refugee camp. Once again
Sunni Arabs felt that their culture and society were under siege. It was this fear that fueled the grand narrative of warfare and cosmic struggle that the ISIS images broadcast.

Global Jihadi War

This image of grand warfare that the Sunni Arabs perceived and that ISIS capitalized on in its own invention of apocalyptic struggle is a familiar refrain in violent movements that are associated with religion. In my comparative study of religious terrorism, Terror in the Mind of God, I describe these images of struggle as “cosmic war.”10 By that I mean what the nineteenth century theorist of warfare, Carl von Clausewitz, meant by “absolute war,” the idea of existential battle, an ultimate struggle between good and evil, order and chaos, that is an all-or-nothing confrontation for survival.11 By vaunting such struggles in religious terms they become transcendent battles, cosmic wars that countenance no surrender or retreat.

The image of cosmic war associated with the Sunni Arab insurgency that led to the rise of ISIS in Iraq was made possible by several things:
- the perception of a social conflict that threatened the Sunni Arabs’ cultural survival
- the sense that there was no escape, no other path to survival than battle
- the religious-based hope that with God’s help they would succeed

All of these conditions were part of the image of cosmic war that crystalized into the Sunni Arab support for al Qaeda and later for ISIS. Without any of these elements ISIS may have existed, supported by al Baghdadi and his a small circle of apocalyptic visionaries, but without the broad Sunni Arab support that made ISIS viable as a political regime for three years, from 2014 to 2017, in Western Iraq and Eastern Syria.

These three features were also a part of the background of another constituency for ISIS: the large network of international followers who joined the movement as jihadi soldiers. These were largely young people in expatriate Muslim immigrant communities in Europe and North America and from war-torn regions of North Africa and the Middle East where social conflict left many promising youth with the feeling that they were marginalized and had a hopeless future. It was these young people that al Baghdadi recruited as the foot soldiers of his shock troops, the willing suicide bombers who sent such fear into the hearts of Syrian and Iraqi troops, and who were willing to behead and bomb and carry out other acts of terrorism both in the region and around the world. The ISIS-related attackers in San Bernardino, for instance, were from Saudi Arabia; the Paris nightclub and Brussels airport bombers were Belgian of Moroccan descent; the Orlando shooter was an American of Afghan descent; the attackers at the Istanbul airport in June 2016 were from Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan and Dagestan. Foreigners from around the world, including Germany, the U.K. and Canada, have come to Syria and Iraq to join the Caliphate army. “They are all foreigners,” one refugee told me in describing the ISIS soldiers who captured his village in northern Iraq.

This far flung network is maintained through Internet communication, through social media such as Twitter and Telegram, through closed websites often on the dark web of Tor, and through glossy online magazines such as Dabiq and Rumiyah. The community forged through this online interaction amounts to something of a Cyber Caliphate. The young people who have been lured to this network and who maintain it come with a variety of motives. Perhaps the strongest is the desire to be involved in a great war, a cosmic struggle that allows them to play out all of their computer game fantasies of warcraft, valor and gore. But some also have come out of a sense of history and piety, a conviction that they were laying their lives on the line for something of transcendent importance for Islamic civilization.
Some of the young volunteers from around the world were attracted to the dramatic vision of apocalyptic cosmic war that animated the inner circle of the movement; others also joined the movement to gain a sense of identity and to be a part of a community. For young people of Middle Eastern parentage who were living in the UK, Europe, and the United States, their experience of being alienated and marginalized immigrant youth was overcome by the acceptance offered by ISIS. Initially their main form of participation was through online chat rooms and Twitter feeds.

My own student research assistants have monitored these Twitter accounts and found that the conversation was dominated by a sense of the importance of the cause, and the sharp we-they distinction between members of the movement’s community and all outsiders, whether or not they were Muslim. A Canadian research scholar, Amarnath Amarsingam, who has interacted with many young Canadian volunteers on Twitter, concurs that community is a dominant part of the appeal. Many of the Twitter called themselves members of the Baqiyah family, using the Arabic term for “enduring” that ISIS employed as one of hallmarks.

“Trust me, I’ve never felt like I’ve belonged anywhere until I met the brothers and sisters on line,” one young volunteer told Amarsingam. “The Internet keeps us connected, keeps us a family,” he added. Then Amarsingam asked the young man to say more about the sense of belonging he felt in the Baqiyah family, and he responded saying that he felt more authentic as a person within the Internet community: “sometimes it’s like the person on line is the real you.”

Another Canadian research scholar, Marc-André Argentino, who has also been monitoring ISIS-related Twitter accounts, agrees with Charlie Winter’s analysis of the “Virtual Caliphate” that the category of “belonging” is one of the most important themes. Regularly,” Argentino reports, “images and video are published depicting brothers praying together and eating together, listening to sermons online, of brothers in arms hugging each other after combat operations, or huddled together hands in the middle (an image reminiscent of a sports team).”

The pictures show the ISIS brotherhood together in physical space, but the sense of community appears to be almost as strong in the connections provided through the media of cyberspace.

One of the strategies employed by ISIS was to use terrorist attacks against the far enemies of the movement—the countries of the United States, France, Turkey and elsewhere that it regarded as being in league with those local forces that were trying to defeat the Islamic State. For this reason, messages went out early in 2016 for young followers around the world to undertake terrorist actions on their own wherever they were. An ISIS spokesman, Abu Mohammad al-Adnani, urged followers around the world to make the month of Ramadan in 2016 “a month of calamity everywhere.” Individuals were told that they did not need to check with ISIS headquarters in Raqqa but attack unbelievers in the name of ISIS wherever they were. A host of attacks followed this call, including those by ISIS sympathizers in Paris, Brussels and Istanbul. They certainly seemed to be well coordinated multiple attacks of the sort that the ISIS central command would support and perhaps even help to plan. Attacks in the American cities of San Bernardino and Orlando appeared to be less well organized, however, conducted by one or two people inspired by ISIS ideology. The perpetrator of the Orlando attack on a gay nightclub in 2016 that killed 49, Omar Mateen, appeared to be even more distantly related to ISIS; he declared his allegiance to Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi by telephone to 911 emergency operators minutes into his rampage, though he was said to have been surfing ISIS sites online in the weeks before the attack. Nonetheless, the ISIS news agency quickly proclaimed him a “fighter for ISIS.” News reports at the time described Mateen as having been “inspired” by ISIS even though they could not find any direct links between him and the movement.
The term “ISIS inspired,” however, might not be quite fitting for the Orlando attack, and for some of the others as well, since “ISIS inspired” implies motives that were primarily related to an allegiance to the ideology of the Islamic State. It also implies that the primarily intention of undertaking an act of terrorism is to carry out the broad directive of movement—in this case attacking unbelievers and enemies of the ISIS cause. There is some evidence that the perpetrator of the Orlando attacks, Omar Mateen, also had personal motives, and attacked a gay bar out of a homophobic rage. In this case, what we can say is that acts were “ISIS branded,” both by Mateen and by the ISIS leadership, whether or not it was directly inspired by ISIS ideology. It appears to me that many of the terrorist acts around the world, from the Boko Haram in Nigeria to Abu Sayyaf in Mindanao, are instances where the ISIS brand has been appropriated to give an aura of global notoriety to a group that has no direct ties to the Middle East movement. Similarly, acts of terrorism conducted in the spirit of ISIS are often done so by individuals who have little connection with the ISIS organization or knowledge of its ideology.

Still the background of these groups and individuals, even if not connected directly with ISIS, share some of the same elements that I mentioned earlier that conduce to a sense of being engaged in a grand an enduring cosmic struggle. Like the movement in Iraq and Syria, they perceive themselves caught up in social conflicts that they perceive as existential, threatening their dignity as persons, the legitimacy of their cultures, and indeed their very survival. They also feel that there is no easy escape from this dilemma, no other path to survival than battle, even if their participation in that battle is an almost symbolic gesture of random and individual acts of terror. And like ISIS, they share a religious-based hope that with God’s help they will succeed, that somehow the sum total of their actions combined with others will lead to an ultimate transformation on both personal and social levels that will be redemptive and transformational.

The Social Study of Worldviews

How do we make sense of this cultural construction of cosmic war? It appears that Hegghammer was right, that the appeal of ISIS is largely a socio-cultural attraction. Put a different way, what has enticed the many followers of ISIS in the region and around the world is its distinctive worldview. It is a social phenomenon but not solely an organizational one. It contains images and ideas, patterns and practices that more rightly can be considered worldviews.

In mulling over the issue of methodological approach some years ago with a colleague, Mona Sheikh, a young Danish political scientist, we began to discuss the issue of how to look at phenomena that were both political and religious, social and cultural—that were worldviews. Mona was engaged in a project involving interviews with Taliban leaders in her family’s ancestral homeland, Pakistan, that led to her recent book on the Pakistani Taliban, Guardians of God. In looking over the literature we saw that there was a tradition of scholarship that tried to take seriously both the religious-ideological as well as the sociopolitical aspects of the worldviews of particular groups. Forty five years ago, in 1971, the sociologist of religion, Roland Robertson, in observing of the work of sociologists such as Robert Bellah and Peter Berger who took seriously religious perspectives as well as social context, dubbed this form of scholarship “sociotheology.” In several article, Mona and I have tried to revive the term to apply to contemporary scholarship that also tries to do the same thing, take both religion and social contexts seriously.

Not everyone likes the term, “sociotheology.” We have gotten negative feedback from scholars of religious studies who are committed to a value-free non-sectarian understanding of
the academic study of religion, for whom anything theological smacks of Sunday School. On the other hand, we have received comments from professional theologians who find our use of the term “theology” to be patronizing. We used the term intending, like Robertson’s first use of it in 1971, to be in a nonsectarian way, as a term that suggests the analysis of religion from within its own frame of reference. It recalls the era of scholarship some centuries ago when theology was “queen of the sciences,” and was meant to describe the integration of knowledge from the basis of an understanding of the nature of reality.

This is what worldviews are, understanding reality from a certain grounded perspective. For that reason, in addition to using the phrase “sociotheology” to describe a certain kind of scholarship that takes seriously both religious frames of reference and social context, Mona Sheikh and I also talk about “epistemic worldview analysis” as our analytic approach. This term marries the concept of episteme that is used by Michel Foucault to designate the structure of knowledge that is the basis of an understanding about how reality works. Such epistemic worldviews are both ideological and social, they are both a set of ideas about the world as well as the nexus of social relations and cultural understandings that make that world viable and real.

How do we get inside other peoples’ worldviews, especially those whose worldviews are quite different ours? This is an especially challenging task in the case of ISIS and other terrorist organizations that are able to embrace violence with a kind of natural openness that defies our usual understanding of the orderly virtues of civil life. This is where the scholar’s efforts to reconstruct the worldview of others is useful, though challenging.

The essays in the forthcoming book that Mona Sheikh and I have edited, Entering Religious Minds, contains a variety of approaches that scholars have used to try to undertake this kind of analysis. They include case studies, participant-observer analysis, interviews, quantitative data and textual studies. The interviews often involve “relational knowledge,” the kind of understanding of a point of view that one only discovers by engaging with the subject in conversation sufficiently to understand the other’s point of view. It is relational in that the scholar doesn’t have a clear sense of what questions to ask before the conversation, and the responses to initial questions leads one further into mental recesses that betray habits of thought and ways of perceiving the world.

This approach to interviewing is not just a matter of being adroit in one’s line of questioning, but also a matter of learning from what was said. It requires one to change ideas about what to ask depending on previous answers, and to let the conversations move in whatever direction seems appropriate. This is neither inductive nor deductive reasoning, which is why I call it “relational,” a form of understanding that emerges from the give and take of points of view in an interactive conversation. It is relational in that what is discovered depends upon the relationship between the conversation partners, with questions changing in response to the way previous questions have been answered. It is reasoning in that it aims at understanding the point of view of the subject, trying to make sense of the logic that informs a person’s actions, including especially those actions that seem so inappropriate and unjustified in normal relationships, acts of violence.

The study of epistemic worldviews also require a certain objectivity, or to put it another way, an awareness of one’s own subjectivity. The point of these conversations is to try to enter into the mindset of the interview subjects, to understand as best as possible how they see the world. This means that as much as possible the interviewers have to try to bracket their own judgments about what is being said. It is a double bracketing in fact: they should try to keep from imposing their own perspective on the subject’s worldview, and to reserve making value
judgments, at least initially, about the truth or falsity of what the subject is saying. Sometimes both of these are difficult, especially when the issue at hand is the moral sanction for violence, or the unequal treatment of other people on the basis of their ethnicity, religion, or gender. Yet for the sake of understanding, the interviewers should keep their opinions about these matters at bay. There will be ample opportunity in the future for them to reflect on the conversation and condemn the subjects, if they feel that condemnation is warranted.

Though these are guidelines for interviewing, there are many cases when the scholar cannot do direct interviews—the subjects may be inaccessible, or obtaining access to them might be too dangerous. In some cases the subjects are no longer alive, and historical studies have to reconstruct the thinking not only of long-dead persons but the social milieu in which they inhabited. But the guidelines still apply: one can interrogate and engage in relational interaction with knowledge received second hand, by people who are familiar with the subject, or from textual sources. These are cases in which the task is to reconstruct the nexus of meanings that make particular statements and actions intelligible. They are attempts to recreate another’s sense of the world.

Three ISIS Worldviews
Applying epistemic worldview analysis to ISIS reveals that there is not just one worldview but several. Each suggests that there is not only a distinctive frame of reference but a nexus of social relationships that are distinctive to each. Hence ISIS is not just one movement but at least three different sorts of groups in an uneasy coalition, each with its own agenda and its own possibilities for long-term continuity even after the fall of ISIS’ territorial claims. ISIS is simultaneously a movement for Sunni Muslim empowerment, a global jihadi movement, and an apocalyptic cult. Each of these groups may be around in one form or another long after the roads from Baghdad and Mosul and from Damascus to Raqqa have been secured.22

A movement for Sunni Arab empowerment. The complicity of the Sunni Arab population in the ISIS administration in Syria and Iraq has been largely opportunistic, not ideological. When I interviewed villagers in 2015 in Iraq’s Kurdistan who had fled ISIS control they told me that the only people in their villages who supported ISIS did so for opportunistic political and economic reasons. These Sunnis and their tribal leaders could as easily turn against ISIS as they have supported it, if they were given other options for participation in public life. This is what happened during the Awakening movement, and al Baghdadi remembers how fickle the Sunni followers were in abandoning al Qaeda in Iraq at that time. For this reason he has instituted a reign of terror in ISIS controlled areas to intimidate the Sunni populace into compliance.

A global jihadi movement. As we have noted, ISIS is more than territory, and more than a Sunni Arab enterprise. Al Baghdadi’s strategy of recruiting young people from around the world to participate in a glorious struggle has succeeded perhaps far beyond his expectations. By late 2016 an estimated thirty thousand fighters had come to Syria and Iraq to join ISIS struggle, with a similar number still in their home countries but pledged to engage in combat with the kafir (nonbeliever) where they were, in part through terrorist acts.23 According to one study these foreign fighters came from 86 different countries. The largest number came from Tunisia, followed by Saudi Arabia, Russia, Jordan, Turkey, France, Morocco, Lebanon, Egypt, and Germany, in that order. Six thousand were European citizens.24 The Counter-Extremism Project has detailed the backgrounds of 90 Americans who joined the struggle, or attempted to do so. Almost all of them are now in prison or have been killed in action.25 As the monitoring of their Twitter and Telegram conversations reveal, their interest in the movement—their worldviews—
are informed by the romantic appeal of a grand transcendent struggle that will make them heroes even after their own deaths.

An apocalyptic movement. At the inner core of the ISIS leadership is a group of apocalyptic extremists who think that their battle is more than part of a glorious cosmic war, is at the leading edge of the final struggle between good and evil that will usher in the last days of the planet and signal the arrival of the Islamic savior, the Mahdi. Though only some of the fighters are propelled by this belief, and few of the ordinary Sunnis in ISIS-controlled territory share it, this is a dominant motive of the inner circle of the movement. They believe that the Mahdi will be coming soon and that they have to act quickly to establish a Caliphate to receive him. The strict code of behavior and extreme brutality in dealing with perceived enemies are aspects of this apocalyptic image and the belief that the Caliphate they create is grounded in medieval Islamic history and practice. The relation between this kind of reign of terror and religion opens the question, however as to whether the ISIS leaders are vicious because their religious understanding requires them to act this way, or whether their need for an intimidating form of extreme violence needs to be justified, and they have found recourse in ancient tradition to do so. Either way it is an eerie relationship between religion and extreme violence.

A worldview analysis of ISIS indicates that there are different motivations and perceptions related to the movement from each of these three different constituencies. This is useful knowledge to have, not only for analytic purposes, but also for counterterrorism strategy. It would be useless, for instance, to waste time trying to persuade the ordinary Sunni Arab supporters of ISIS that the theology of the movement was inaccurate if the Sunni Arab supporters had little knowledge of these ideas, nor were they the reason for their interest in it. Similarly, the destruction of ISIS territorial control may not deter the foreign fighters if their interest in the movement is primarily its romantic image of cosmic war.

These variations in worldview make it difficult to determine just how ISIS will end. Though currently the territorial control of the movement has been eroded, it is not clear whether the worldviews of the different constituencies related to ISIS have been fundamentally changed. The Sunni Arabs still long for a territorial empowerment. The foreign fighters are still excited about joining a cosmic war. And the circle of apocalyptic extremists still expect a dramatic confrontation at the end of days.

For these reasons, the worldviews of ISIS will likely persist long after the physical control of territory in Syria and Iraq have been abandoned. The digital apparatus of websites, cypermagazines, video uploads, Twitter communications and dark web locations has been well established and though it may be interrupted by ISIS’ territorial defeat, it likely will be maintained in some form somewhere in the world other than in the ISIS controlled cities of Raqqa and Mosul. There is no reason to think that they will be entirely dismantled. Indeed, the passion of belonging to the ISIS cyber community might even intensify in the period after the fall of territorial control. Perhaps nothing brings together a community as the sense of being under siege and needing to band together for strength. The Twitter feeds in mid-2017, for instance, were buzzing with the assaults on Fallujah, Raqqa and Mosul, with rallying cries to defend the Caliphate.

This may be part of the dark future of ISIS. The encouragement of ISIS for individuals to take up bombs against secular and non-supportive Muslim societies leaves room for a plethora of acts of terrorism that may be undertaken for mixed motives but given the legitimization of ISIS ideology through ISIS-branding. Individuals can be comforted by the fact that even though their horrible actions are condemned by most people, including most Muslims, around the globe, their
comrades in the online communities forged through Internet connections will digitally applaud their crimes. Thus if the worldview of ISIS survives in the minds of even a fragmented community of activists around the world, the threat from that lethal worldview will persist.

Eventually, however, worldviews can change. Cultural images of cosmic war can subside and vanish as quickly as they arose. In the case of Northern Ireland and India’s Punjab, for instance, these regions that were racked with the most hideous forms of terrorist violence just a couple of decades ago have become calm. Though the idea of struggle for a grand religious and ethnic cause persists within communities that were engaged in battle in those regions, those images have been pushed into the background as people are involved in the daily matters of getting on with life and co-existing with people that just a few years ago they would have regarded as the enemy. As dominant as the images of worldviews may be at one particular time, these notions are not etched in stone. They can change and even whisk away in the healing winds of time.

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ENDNOTES

8 “Resolving Jihadist Conflicts: Religion, Civil War, and Prospects for Peace,” a research project hosted by Uppsala University, Sweden. http://www.pcr.uu.se/research/resolving-jihadist-conflicts/
9 Interview with Abdul Salam Al-Kubaisi, Chief of External Relations, Association of Muslim Clergy in al Anbar Province, in Baghdad, May 6, 2004.
10 Juergensmeyer, Terror in the Mind of God.
11 Carl von Clausewitz, On War, orig pub in 1832.
15 Mark Juergensmeyer, “ISIS Inspired--or Branded?” Huffington Post, June 20, 2016.


22 I appreciate the help of my research assistants, Saba Sadri and Mufid Taha, in monitoring ISIS-related websites and online social networks.

23 The estimate of 30,000 foreign fighters of ISIS is from the Soufan Group, a counter-extremism research organization, cited in Ashley Kirk, “How Many Foreign Fighters are Fighting for ISIL?” *The Independent* (UK), March 24, 2016, online edition.

24 Ibid.