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IS' Discursive Power in the Middle East

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Introduction

Along with the use of armed violence, the Islamic State (IS) has employed a discursive power through a careful choice of words in several languages to promote its cause and ideology. Through such a powerful tool, IS has succeeded not only to convince thousands of Muslims, locals, and foreigners, to join its metaphorical “war for true Islam”, but it has also succeeded to redistribute power by reshaping existing socio-political, cultural and historical regional features, re-configuring the geographical borders, and disrupting the regional economy.

This paper does not debate theological or linguistic themes here, which form part of a much bigger project being conducted at Durham University and supported by the al-Sabah Programme. Rather, it analyses the political messages of IS, and its uses of language to explain other socio-cultural and political phenomena, or as Fred Halliday has called it, to instrumentalise linguistics.¹ We will investigate the notion of the state and its legitimacy in IS’ narrative in *al-Naba’*, published in Arabic language, *Dār al-Islām* published in French language, *Dābiq* and

Rumīyyah published in the English language.

This paper first analyses the evolution of Salafi-Jihad movements and ideas. It also examines the notion of the “state” and the “caliphate” in IS’ discourse. Finally, it highlights on the tool of legitimacy the group uses in its narrative to support its notion of the state.

Salafi-Jihadism in Context

In the Islamic tradition, Salafism is a reformist movement that emerged during the Abbasid Caliphate. The rapid expansion of the Muslim Empire exposed Muslims, who had limited socio-cultural exposure at that time, to different civilisations and schools of thought. For instance, they had to face the Greek and the Roman traditions in Egypt and the Levant, and had to learn these traditions. Baghdad at the same time was also flourishing in all aspects. The Caliph al-Ma'mun (813-833)² established the House of Wisdom (*Bait al-Hikma*), which translated books written in foreign languages into Arabic. What emerged in this dialogue was the ways in which Greek philosophy texts directly challenged Muslim thought, particularly through their promotion of

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reasoning over revelation. As a result, the *Mu'tazilah* movement emerged. *Mu'tazilah* means 'dissenters'. The thinkers of this movement sought balance between reasoning and Divine's text. In response to this movement, Aḥmed Ibn Ḥanbal (780-855), a jurist and a theologian from Baghdad, introduced his orthodox Salafist Sunni doctrine, which called for adherence to the text of Qur'an and Hadith (the teaching of the Prophet Mohammad) to achieve social reform. Taqī ad-Dīn Ahmad Ibn Taymiyyah (1263-1328) and Ibn Qayyim al-Jawziyya (1292-1350) were also early Ḥanbalite Salafī theologians. All called for the return to true Islam, where the law of the divine is represented in Qur'an and Hadith.

Salafi-Jihadism, on the other hand, is a relatively contemporary phenomenon. Salafi-Jihadism was arguably introduced in the writings of the Egyptian Sayyid Quṭb (1906–1966). It also developed with the rise of the leftist radical movements in Europe in the 1960s and 1970s. Sayyid Quṭb resented pan-Arab policies of the Egyptian President Jamal Abdul al-Nasser and called for regime change. He was later executed in late August 1966 for plotting against President Nasser. Wight argues that Quṭb's writings shaped

the ideas of al-Qaeda's ideologue, Ayman az-Zawāhirī.³

Salafi-Jihad was materialised during the Afghan war (1979-1989). Yet, the milestone of the manifestation of this trend arguably is the Kuwait crisis (1990-1991). The occupation of Kuwait divided the Arab world between those who rejected the occupation such as Syria and Egypt, and those who accepted it like Yemen and Palestine Liberation Organisation (PLO). The Arab *mujahidin* (the fighters of Jihad) in Afghanistan rejected the presence of American soldiers in the Holy Land. When the House of Saud rejected Osama Bin Laden's offer to defend the Holy Shrine, the latter vowed to attack the US and its allies.

The Algerian Civil War (1991-2002) and the Bosnian war (1992-1995) also have their own share in the development of radical violent Islam. It produced a new generation of jihadists that later became attracted to al-Qaeda's version of the global Salafi-Jihad.

The establishment of al-Qaeda in the late 1980s in Afghanistan gave birth to a new trend of Jihad. While the Taliban, the *Groupe Islamique Armé* (GIA) and the *Front Islamique du Salut* (FIS) had local agendas in Afghanistan, Algeria and France,

al-Qaeda had an international agenda. Hence, the organisation is considered the first organisation to establish 'global' Salafi-Jihadism al-Qaeda began to attack the US and its allies in the world. The first attack was on the US army residence at Gold Mohur hotel in Aden in 1992, followed by the bombing of the World Trade Centre in 1993, and the bombing of the US embassies in Nairobi and Dar al-Salam in 1998. The 11th September 2001 attacks were decisive for the US to declare a global war against al-Qaeda.

The occupation of Iraq in 2003 was another turning point. The fall of Baghdad in 2003 is believed to be the third catastrophe, *nakba* (after the defeat of the 1967 war and the Israeli occupation of Beirut, the Arab's capital of culture, in 1982) for the pan-Arab and revolutionary forces. It gave birth to the Islamic State (IS). IS, though, is one of its kind. It introduced yet another turning point of global Jihadi-Salafism. Like al-Qaeda, IS divides the world into two groups, the house of Islam, *dār al-Islām*, where all Muslims are subjected to their rigid and violent Salafi Islam, and the house of war, *dār al-Ḥard*, which designates those who are against IS, be they Muslims or non-Muslims. The difference between al-Qaeda and IS thought

is rather significant. IS not only uses violence to achieve its goals, it rejects the nation-state system. It is the first organisation to establish the caliphate. There is no other jihadi groups including al-Qaeda which had the aim to redraw the map of the contemporary Middle East and establish an Islamic caliphate.

The *Khilafah* in a Historical Context

Khilāfah to Protect Islam

One of the repeated patterns in IS' discourse is the use of the term *Khilāfah* or *Imāmah*. According to the Islamic tradition, both concepts refer to a religious state that it meant to protect Islam and implement Islamic law, Shari'ah. In his treatise *The Ordinances of Government (al-Aḥkām al-Ṣultānīa)*, the Muslim thinker, Abu al-Hasan al-Māwardī (974-1058) argued, that the *Imāmah* is subjected for the succession of the prophecy (prophecy of the prophet of Islam, Mohammad) in order to guard the religion (Islam) and to govern the society, and therefore, establishing a caliphate is a duty.⁴ In the same vein, the Sunni theologian, Ibn Taymīyyah (1263-1328) argued that Islamic rules such as jihad,

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justice, pilgrimage [to Mecca], standing by the oppressed, implementing corporal punishment [*hudud*], could only be achieved through force and *Imāmah*.⁵

IS' discourse on *Khilāfah* or *Imāmah* corresponds with traditional Islamic thought. Abu Mohammad al-'Adnānī, IS's first spokesman, emphasised that the purpose of the *Khilāfah* was to apply Shari'ah: "That is the reality of succession, which Allah created us for. It is not simply kingship, subjugation, dominance, and rule. Rather, succession is to utilise all that for the purpose of compelling the people to do what the Shari'ah (Allah's law) requires of them concerning their interests in the hereafter and worldly life, which can only be achieved by carrying out the command of Allah, establishing His religion, and referring to His law for judgment".⁶

The State-Caliphate

IS also uses the term *Dawlat al-Khilāfah*, or the State-Caliphate to assert the indivisibility of the state and religion.⁷ Traditionally, the Caliph was the political and the religious leader of the *Ummah*, the Muslim community. He was the ruler of the state and the guardian of Shari'ah. Yet, when the Buyid dynasty (932-1062) conquered

Baghdad in 945, the Caliphate rule was no longer political, it was limited to religion.⁸ The administration and political affairs were in the hand of the Buyid military commanders instead. Trapped between the *de facto* rule of the Buyid commanders and the weak Caliph. In his treatise, al-Māwardī was the first Muslim thinker who attempted to "make sense of the very ambiguous position in which the caliph now found himself".⁹ He began with a discussion on the eligibility characteristics of the Caliph. He argued that because the Abbasid Caliph lacked the material power to run the state's institutions, he could appoint a "vizierate delegation (*tafwīd*), essentially entrusting all his functions to an official who acts for him in every aspect" or "to execute his [the Caliph's] orders, whose role is therefore that of a prime minister", what he called *tanfidh*, or implementation.¹⁰

The Ottoman Legacy

In most of the Islamic thought, the caliph should be an Arab. Although the caliphate was in the hands of the non-Arabs, the Ottomans (1299-1922), a debate on the caliphate did not come to the fore in the 18th and 19th century. This is arguably due to the inclusiveness and the decentralisation system of the Ottoman Empire. Even the

most prominent Salafī reformists in the 19th century, Sayyid Jamāl al-Dīn al-Afghānī (1838-1897), and Moḥammad ‘Abdah (1849- 1905) did not discuss the issue of the caliphate. Perhaps the first modern debates on the issue of the Caliphate system were raised in the writings of ‘Abdul al-Raḥmān al-Kawākibī (1855-1902). Al-Kawākibī, a Kurd from Aleppo, was influenced by Italian migrants in the city and by the European enlightenment ideas. He accused the Ottomans of corrupting Islam. Hence, he called to overthrow the “Turkish” Caliphate in Istanbul and install an Arab Caliphate in Mecca instead. The Sultan Abdul Hamid II (1842-1918) sent him to exile in Cairo in 1899.

The Muslims viewed the collapse of the Caliphate system in 1924 in Istanbul as a regressive step and a civilisational defeat. Thus, voices immediately advocated for the restoration of the Caliphate. Mohammad Rashīd Rida, a Lebanese theologian and a student of Moḥammad ‘Abdah, advocated for the establishment of the Caliphate in his book *al-Khilāfah* (published in 1922). Interestingly, he called for the establishment of *Khilāfah* in Mosul because it is a convergence point for Kurds, Arabs and Turks. Perhaps this is why the leader of IS,

Abu Bakr al-Baghdādī, declared the caliphate in Mosul

Nevertheless, a change took place in the Islamic discourse. Muslim thinkers called for the implementation of Shari‘ah within the borders of the new Middle East, rather than for the restoration of the Caliphate system. For instance, in Egypt, society became more secularised. Thus, in 1928, the Muslim theologian Hassan al-Banna established the Muslim Brotherhood, *Ikhwān*, and called for the Islamisation of the society, by peaceful means.¹¹ Al-Banna was influenced by the writings of Rida. Hassan al-Banna later called for Jihad against the state of Israel in 1948.

However, there were also other voices that called for the restoration of the caliphate beyond the nation-state system in the Middle East. For instance, Mohammad Taqī al-Dīn al-Nabhānī, an Islamic scholar from Jerusalem and the founder of the Pan-Islamic party, *Ḥizb-a-Tahrīr*, called for the establishment of the Caliphate in the vast majority of the Muslim world, to be brought by “peaceful politics and ideological subversion”.¹²

After World War II (WWII), there was almost no reference to the reinstatement of

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the Islamic Caliphate until 1973, when the Saudi militant Juhaymān al-Otaybī led a military operation and occupied the Grand Mosque of Mecca. The operation was a protest against the Saudi monarchy and the House of Saud. Al-Otaybī managed to convince his brother in law, Moḥammad al-Qaḥṭānī – who himself was one of al-Baz’s¹³ student – that he was Imām Mahdī, the last Imam who will return at the end of life to establish the Caliphate, according to the Islamic tradition. Al-Otaybī argued that his attack was a victory for Imām al-Mahdī. He also pledged allegiance to Moḥammad al-Qaḥṭānī, as the Caliph of Muslims. The insurgency was quickly suppressed. Some authors, such as William McCants, mention him as the ideological founder of IS and the Mecca incident as the group’s birthplace.¹⁴ Many IS supporters also use his name for twitter accounts. Ever since, no one claimed the establishment of the Caliphate. Even al-Qaeda viewed it as an ideal to attain in the long-term.

IS’ Struggle for Power – A Struggle Over Identity

The second central theme in IS’ discourse is the concept of *Ummah* and the struggle for power with the regional actors in the Middle

East. IS paints the current conflict in Iraq and Syria with an identity choice "brush" over the Islamic concept of *Ummah*. In the face of this crisis – which the group terms “*Jāhiliyyah*” in reference to the pre-Islamic era – the oppressed Muslims are called upon to take revenge and to join the Caliphate for the final battle that will bring back the golden age of the Muslim community.

The Crisis of the Ummah

While essential, the concept of *Ummah* is very fluid and has been developing through history. *Ummah* usually refers to the global community of Muslims, and has often been used to express “the essential unity of Muslims in diverse cultural settings”.¹⁵ This definition highlights three main traits of the *Ummah* that are repeatedly emphasised in IS’ discourse. First, its most central attribute is Muslim unity. It is expressed through the *tawḥīd* (monotheism) doctrine and for IS, it is an “obligation” which “can only be effective under the authority of one head that is the Caliph”.¹⁶ Second, the *Ummah* is universal: it transcends time, space and all political, national, or ethnic organisational structures. Through stressing the unification of all Muslims worldwide, IS’ discourse crafts similarity amongst variety and paves the way for a strong in-group identity and

underlines the appeal to embrace the political project of the Islamic State. Third, the *Ummah* is an Islamic concept and includes only those who embrace Islam and are, thus, considered Muslims. However, there is no consensus on what makes a Muslim. As will be demonstrated later in this paper, IS uses this fluidity of concept to ‘educate’ Muslims by restructuring their identity.

Although IS’ idea of the *Ummah* and Islamic unity mostly complies with Islamic tradition, it comes up against three main paradoxes. On the one hand, al-Baghdadi holds a hyper-fundamentalist vision of the Muslim community, which is an egalitarian, monolithic group purely grounded on religion. In this interpretation of the *Ummah*, socialisation can be achieved only through IS’ Caliphate, which provides the religious education that has been erased by the mischief of Western domination.¹⁷ In fact, at the time of the Prophet, socialisation was achieved through family and tribal structures. In other words, the *Ummah* was the continuation of the social order. On the other hand, by equating the concepts of *Ummah* and the Caliphate, IS is clearly demonstrating its goal to create a society which goes back to the time of the Prophet,

when the *Ummah* and the state largely coincided. In doing so, it completely disregards the historical, social, and political developments of the last centuries. Lastly, as will be described in the following section, by excluding a large range of the Muslim community, IS goes against the notion of a unified *Ummah*.

Regaining the Glory of the Ummah

A close look at IS’ discourse reveals that the composition of the community is better defined by distinguishing it from those who do not belong to it, and, thus, deemed to be its enemies. Moreover, just as IS coins a strong in-group identity for the *Ummah*, it articulates an opposite, out-group identity, the *kāfir* (disbeliever) identity.

The dichotomous representation of the regional and world order is one of the cornerstones of IS’ narrative. In 2014, al-Baghdadi¹⁸ explained that the world has been “divided into two camps and two trenches, with no third camp”, the abode of peace and abode of war. Accordingly, the enemies of the *Ummah* – and of the Islamic Caliphate – all belong to the same out-group identity and should be fought equally. This raises the following question: Who are considered IS’ enemies?

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The *kufār* (plural of *kafr*, infidel) are in the first place those who are in essence non-Muslim, which are those who do not belong to the *Ummah* in its original meaning. It chiefly refers to the *mushrikīn* (polytheists), those who worship anything or anyone beside the singular God, and those who do not believe in God at all. According to the IS, those groups are the atheists, polytheists, and idolaters. For example, the Hindus, Buddhists, Christians, Jews, and Druze are included under this category. IS believes that this anti-Islam enmity has been repeated throughout history, from the crusades to the Napoleonic and colonial wars and the division of the Middle East after World War I to the current war against IS.¹⁹

However, the enemies of the *Ummah* are not only non-Muslims; IS refers to the Shi'a as *Rāfidha* (rejectionists), those who, in the Islamic tradition, rejected the Caliphate of Abu Bakr. IS associates the Shi'a to the Iranian state, and stresses the history between the Sunni and the Shi'a, and between Iran and Iraq. It argues that the Shi'a seek revenge for the murder of Ḥusayn Ibn Alī who was killed by the second Umayyad Caliph, Yazīd, in 680 AD, and for Iraq-Iran war in the 1980s.²⁰

The Islamic State uses the term *murtaddīn* (apostates) to describe other jihadi groups, including Sunni ones, especially al-Qaeda, the Taliban, al-Nuṣra Front and the Islamic Front. IS accuses these groups of having made an alliance with the nation-states in the region and of applying laws other than the Shari'ah. According to the Islamic tradition, *Murtaddīn* refer to Muslims who refused to pay *Zakat* to the Caliph Abu Bakr in what is known the *Ridda* wars (632-633). Moreover, Islamic political groups such as the *Ikhwān* or Muslim Brotherhoods worldwide, as well as the Islamic party of Iraq, are targeted for playing the political game according to the non-Islamic rules of Western powers. This category also includes non-Islamic ruling parties such as the Syrian and Iraqi governments who militarily fight IS.

Even more striking, IS dismisses a large part of the Muslim community itself. According to IS' rationale, since pledging allegiance to the Caliphate is an obligation for all Muslims, those who do not take an active part in the fight for the *Ummah* against its enemies are themselves considered enemies.

Following this dual division of the world between the *Ummah* and the *kufār* IS gives all Muslims an identity choice²¹ for the last battle: Either join the *Ummah* and, thus, the

Caliphate, or fight it. Such demarcation paves the way for the appeal to embrace IS' political project of establishing a Caliphate, considered as "the final stage of the [Ummah] before the Day of Judgement".²² By presenting itself as the true protector of the Muslim community, it provided itself with religious legitimacy to fight Muslims and non-Muslim communities that oppose it.

In its struggle for power and legitimacy, IS uses language as a tool to shape the two camps' identities – the *Ummah* and the Others – through a careful choice of words in order to create patterns of association. While the Caliphate's fight is glorified and promised victory, its enemies are dehumanised and demonised, imbued with attributes such as "evil", "arrogance", "anger" or "envy".

According to IS, the struggle for power and the crisis of the *Ummah* has reached their climax. Therefore, it emphasises the imminence of the final battle. Since the existence of the *Ummah* is a just cause to fight for, jihad becomes the *sine qua non* condition for the survival of the Muslim community. Accordingly, it clearly appears that IS frames an apocalyptic vision of the world order, to try to polarise identities in

order to attract support for its reformist project.

Conclusion

This paper focused on IS' political discourse. While the group's newsletters and magazines discuss a wide range of subjects, this research found out that the concept of *Khilāfah* and the group's struggle for power are the most repeated political messages that it stresses. IS is the first Jihadi group that has called for the restoration of the Islamic Caliphate as a short-term goal. The paper showed that IS-style Caliphate exists in Islamic tradition. The group argues that the purpose of the re-establishment of the Caliphate was to implement the Islamic law in Muslim society. This resembles the argument of classic and prominent Muslim thinkers such as al-Māwardī and Ibn Taymiyyah. Also, IS' call for the re-establishment of the 'true' *Khilāfah* where the Caliph is the religious and the political leader of the state has a historical root.

The second political message of IS is the struggle for power and identity through the use of the term *Ummah*. IS stresses the unity of all Muslims in order to restructure an in-group identity that would serve the group's

political project of the state. The paper also argued that IS uses the concept of the *Ummah* to create a distinct in-group and out-group identity. For the group, the world is divided into two camps, *Dār al-Islam*, and *Dār al-Kufr*. Accordingly, the enemies of IS belong to the out-group identity. To summarise, IS holds a very restrictive definition of the *Ummah*. The concept

becomes a factor of both social inclusiveness and social exclusiveness. Paradoxically, the exclusion of the great majority of Muslims is leading to the increasing division of the global Muslim community for the sake of its unity and its preservation.

Notes

¹ Michael A. K. Halliday.

² The years indicated in brackets refer to the years of reign.

³ Lawrence Wright, *The Looming Tower: Al-Qaeda and the Road to 9/11*. New York: Knopf, 2006.

⁴ Abu al-Hasan al-Māwardī, *The Ordinances of Government* [In Arabic]. Kuwait: Dar Abi Qutayna, 1989, p. 3.

⁵ Ibn Taymīyyah, *Governance According to The Shari'ha* [in Arabic]. Beirut: Dar al-Afaq al-Jadidah, 1983, p. 138-139.

⁶ Abu Mohammad al-'Adnānī, "This is the Promise of Allah", in *Al-Furqan Foundation*, 2014.

⁷ Al-Furqan Foundation, *Al-Naba' 13*, January 2016. p. 13.

⁸ Hugh Kennedy, *The Caliphate*. London, Pelican, 2016, p. 175.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Ibid, p.221.

¹¹ Olivier Carré, "Ḥassan Al-Bannā" in John L. Esposito (eds.), *The Oxford Encyclopedia of the Islamic World*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009.

¹² Hugh Kennedy, p. 138.

¹³ Al-Baz (1910-1999) was a prominent Salafi leader and the Grand Mufti of Saudi Arabia.

¹⁴ Will F. McCants, *The ISIS apocalypse: the history, strategy, and doomsday vision of the Islamic State*, New York: Picador, 2016.

¹⁵ Ahmad S. Dallal, "Ummah" in John L. Esposito (eds.), *The Oxford Encyclopedia of the Modern Islamic World, Oxford Islamic Studies*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995.

¹⁶ Al-Hayat Media Center, *Dār al-Islām 1*, December 2014, p. 13.

¹⁷ Farhad Khosrokhavar, *Inside Jihadism: Understanding Jihadi Movements Worldwide*. Boulder, CO: Paradigm Publishers, 2009, p. 191.

¹⁸ Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, "A Message to the Mujahidin and the Muslim Ummah from Amirul- Mu'minin Abu Bakr al-Husayni al-Qurashi al-Baghdadi", *Al-Hayat Media Center*, 2014.

¹⁹ Al-Hayat Media Center, *Dār al-Islām 2*, February 2015, p. 10.

²⁰ Al-Hayat Media Center, *Dār al-Islām 3*, March 2015, p. 6.

²¹ Haroro Ingral, 'An analysis of Islamic State's Dabiq magazine' in *Australian Journal of Political Science*, Vol. 13, June 2016, pp. 1-20.

²² Al-Hayat Media Center, *Dābiq 14*, April 2016, p. 64.