

## REALLY? MISREADING WHAT ISIS WANTS

Until mid-2014, the so-called Islamic State (or, ISIS) was either ignored or collapsed by the global media under numerous organizations affiliated with Al Qaeda (AQ). In less than a year, ISIS captured an estate as big as the UK across Syria and Iraq, establishing itself as the major challenge to regional stability in the Middle East. ISIS appears both familiar and different at the same time: it prioritizes territorial control and governance like Taliban did before 2001, but also advertises global objectives similar to AQ. Furthermore, with its emphasis on publicized atrocities and seemingly irrational acts of violence, the organization consciously projects unapologetic and unadulterated millenarian goals, raising questions about, as Graeme Wood highlighted in a recent -- and well-received -- *The Atlantic* article, "What ISIS Really Wants."

Wood pushes forward two central arguments. First, ISIS should be analyzed on its own terms, not in the broader context of global jihadism or through the frameworks applied to AQ. Second, ISIS's goals and strategy are best understood in the context of its "medieval religious nature." ISIS, in this narrative, is primarily a "religious group" comprised of fanatics who are bent on facilitating the end of days while also preparing for an apocalyptic battle in the town of Dabiq in Syria. The consequent advice is two-fold. First, the West should keep bleeding ISIS white in Syria and Iraq through air strikes and other forms of indirect strangulation; the hope is that, as a flawed and irrational enterprise, ISIS will eventually implode. Second, since the primary threat is "religious," the West should combat ISIS on theological grounds. Wood even suggests that non-violent interpretations of Salafism should be empowered at the expense of the violent branch championed by ISIS.

Wood's first argument is right on spot, but the second is dangerously misleading. If one is to look beyond ISIS's own propaganda and the tilted views of its "fans," the organization appears much more pragmatic *and dangerous* than Wood claims. Put bluntly, we should not be concerned about millennial fanatics who are preparing for the end of days, but about the persistence of a quasi-state run by an alliance of jihadists who have learnt from the

mistakes of AQ and Baathists who know how to work the human and political terrain on limited resources.

Furthermore, time is on ISIS's side. By building on an inflammable ideology and the Sunni-Shia tensions in ungoverned spaces, ISIS is trying to transform the territorial and demographic make-up of a region that can easily be described as the religious, sectarian, and ethnic tinderbox of the Middle East. If not addressed, ISIS will not self-implode as some predict. If handled carelessly, on the other hand, ISIS crisis may drag the entire Middle East to its own Thirty Years War, the original version of which wrecked Europe between 1618 and 1648 in a deadly firestorm that was fuelled by a cocktail of religious passions and power politics. Battling ISIS on "theological grounds," in turn, is not only futile, but also counterproductive. The ISIS crisis is not about a battle over different interpretations of Islam. It is about a cool-headed organization with an impressive understanding of "image management" that feeds on state failure and sectarian tensions. ISIS is not even trying to expand for expansion's sake, it is trying to "dig in" and create a mini-empire in Sunni-majority areas in Iraq and Syria that fuels and is in turn fuelled by sectarian tensions. These limited goals, however, make ISIS more dangerous to regional stability, not less.

Getting the ISIS crisis right requires recognizing three dynamics. First, there is a method to ISIS's madness, just like there is a coalition of pragmatists -- jihadists and secular Baathists -- behind its strategy. The resulting break-neck pragmatism makes ISIS more, not less, dangerous. Second, ISIS's approach to territorial control is built on, again, pragmatism and flexibility. Strategic retreats or military setbacks like Kobane do not hurt the organization as much as it is perceived in the West. Third, religion plays an important role in the ISIS crisis, but in the context of the sectarian tensions in the Middle East.

### **How Not to Read ISIS**

Wood's first argument is that ISIS is not AQ redux, it is something more, something far worse. This assertion deserves attention for two reasons. First, global media's response to ISIS has been rather generic. Narratives over the global jihad and the so-called war on terror remained relatively unchanged, with ISIS effortlessly replacing AQ as the chief antagonist.

Second, we should not underestimate the impacts of “intellectual stickiness” on debates over strategy and policy. Like organizations that refuse to change their practices in the face of rapid change, analysts who have invested their intellectual acumen on AQ for a decade and a half may be tempted to overplay the association and similarities between AQ and ISIS, which is easier to do if both are collapsed under some unifying global jihad theme. If the last 14 years should have taught us anything, it is that fighting abstract concepts and unidentifiable enemies is a counterproductive exercise. ISIS is a new and concrete threat to international security and should be treated as one. Wood is to be applauded for his emphasis on this point.

Wood’s second argument -- that ISIS should be analyzed in the context of its medieval religious nature -- is not only flawed, but also not as novel as it may appear in the first place. First, the evidence that Wood garners for his arguments involves a little too much reading into the propaganda material that ISIS itself releases. This is not all that much different from trying to understand what Nazi Germany really wanted by reading into the propaganda machine led by Joseph Goebbels without being able to observe what is really happening inside the country. Furthermore, it does not take much imagination to surmise that an entity as image-conscious as ISIS would use its propaganda to control and manipulate its enemies’ perceptions.

The seemingly first-hand insights offered by Wood should also be approached with caution. In particular, Wood interviews a number of ISIS sympathizers (one may even invoke the term “fans” non-disparagingly) in London and as far as Australia to provide support for his case. ISIS is truly a “hermit kingdom” and one cannot be faulted for not having interviewed ISIS agents themselves, but building a case on individuals who have never set foot on ISIS controlled areas and do not have verified organic relations with the organization should also be approached with caution. In the end, it is very likely that the said interviews reveal more about ISIS sympathizers’ projections of what they think (or, imagine) ISIS wants and less about what ISIS really wants to do.

The second flaw of the article involves the false dichotomy on which the analytical punch of the paper is placed. In particular, Wood argues that the Obama administration,

along with many “apologists” who aim to disassociate Islam and ISIS, strive to portray ISIS as a “modern” entity that is more or less “like us.” This way, Wood implicitly brands those who point towards a third alternative -- that ISIS may not be “like us” but still profess earthly goals and pursue them with strategic logic and pragmatism -- either as apologists for Islam or simply naïve spectators who fail to appreciate the gravity of the situation. This is an analytical pitfall, or a trap, of the first order.

Stripped of the false dichotomy on which it is built, the argument also loses its novelty. What Wood argues about ISIS in 2015 is almost identical to the conventional wisdom about AQ in 2001: since the barbarity of the actions do not easily lend themselves to rational analysis for the Western spectators, the attackers must really be what they appear to be, that is, relentless fanatics whose eyes are fixated on other-worldly goals and ambitions. The last decade showed us clearly that misunderstanding the political objectives of the enemy and their capacity for developing pragmatic strategies can only lead to costly endeavors, either in the form of inaction or over-reaction. What we need at the moment is not old wine in new bottles, but a realistic assessment of the strategic logic behind ISIS. Such task, in turn, is best accomplished by making sense of ISIS’s seemingly irrational and suicidal actions, understanding the ways in which ISIS approaches statehood and territoriality, and fleshing out the role that religion plays in the regional crisis that empowers ISIS.

Would ISIS leaders prefer a world where they rule from Raqqa to Spain in the West and Indonesia in the East? No doubt. Are they taking steps toward that goal, or, are they “really” seeking to bring out the end of days? Not really. ISIS operates on limited resources but on break-neck pragmatism and a cool-headed, if risk-accepting, strategy. Mistaking them for fanatics would be a mistake with grave strategic consequences.