

The Islamic State FAQs

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The 'so-called' Islamic State makes news. But how much do we really know about what drives it to such murderous attacks on innocent people around the world? What is the ideology that lies behind the headlines? In this blog Omar Al Ghazzi, @Omar_alghazzi, now at Sheffield University but soon to join LSE's Department of Media and Communications, gives his analysis of what they stand for.



This blog post takes the form of answers to frequently asked questions about the Islamic State group, Islam, and terrorism. I chose this format because I think it is important to collectively think and find more simple ways to discuss the complex politics of terrorism.

What does the Islamic State group want?

The Islamic State (IS) group wants power and legitimacy. It wants to establish and expand its control in Syria, Iraq, and eventually across the globe. It wants to convince Muslims that it represents a return to the true and authentic Islamic message and that democracy and secularism are un-Islamic. It tells Muslims that they have been humiliated for too long. It seeks to persuade them that their religion is violent and that only savagery can end their alleged humiliation and bring them victory in this life and reward in the afterlife. IS wants to build a network of supporters around the world willing at a moment's notice to wage individual and coordinated terror attacks.

Does the Islamic State group represent Islam?

The Islamic State group represents an Islam. Thankfully, the Islam that IS advocates is a fringe Islam in the sense that only a tiny minority of Muslims believe in it. However, there is no unified Islam. The more than one billion Muslims in the world are divided on multiple fronts from culture, politics, language, class etc. Ultimately, Islam (in

the political sense) is what Muslims make of it and how they act on it. And certainly there is a rich diversity in Islamic schools of thought; many of which have been side-lined by petrodollar-backed salafi-wahabi doctrines

Aren't some of the ideas of the Islamic State group intrinsic to Islam?

Islamic teachings include rules about peace and war. Like other religions, if one wants to justify violence through interpreting scripture, there are plenty of opportunities to do so. The opposite is also true. There are particular issues in Islamic beliefs that may make it more challenging to reconcile with liberal democracies because many Muslims believe that Islam should be the source of the laws and government that rule over their lives.

What does the Islamic State group want to achieve from its attacks in Europe?

IS wants to demonstrate to Muslims that Islam is irreconcilable with European societies and beliefs. The best way to demonstrate that is through inflicting violence on ordinary Europeans and instigating panic over security. Savagery is at the heart of IS ideology. IS members believe savagery is the fastest way to gain power. IS wants non-Muslim Europeans to associate Islam with savagery. It wants a backlash against Muslim communities. It does not want these communities to integrate in European societies. Symbolically, visible figures like London mayor Sadiq Khan, who tell a story of Muslim success and integration in European and British societies, are the best counter-argument against its propaganda.

How does international politics relate to interpretations of Islam?

The roots of extreme interpretations of Islam can be traced to medieval scholarly debates and to more modern origins, for instance in the early 20th century. However, Islamist extremism's more recent resurgence can be traced to the 1980s when Western and Arab Gulf countries funded and armed jihadists to fight the Soviet Union in Afghanistan— creating a militant network of jihadist fighters. The deployment of US forces in the Arabian Peninsula after the Gulf war in 1991 was portrayed as a Christian invasion of Islam's heartland. The post-9/11 Anglo-American invasion of Iraq and the country's disintegration made things worse. Rampant and brutal authoritarianism in Arab countries, which is associated with failed secularism, has also empowered jihadist movements. Several Arab regimes supported jihadists when it suited their foreign policy agendas. The Israel-Palestine conflict and the abuse of rights of Muslims from Palestine to Chechnya have been a consistent element in jihadist propaganda. Lastly, international (often Gulf) funding of Islamic institutions in Europe and elsewhere has been indispensable to the mainstreaming of extreme interpretations of Islam.

How can we talk about Islam and extremism?

Reactionary white racism and violence against Muslims is exactly what IS wants. Those who claim that they are fighting IS through attacking Muslims are only choosing to become the pawns of the Islamic State. However, that does not mean there should be no discussion of Islamist extremism and of terrorism.

Terrorism has killed many more Muslims than non-Muslims. There is a struggle for what Islam means in all countries with significant Muslim populations. Muslims calling out extremism should be empowered rather than fought. So it is also not helpful to talk about Muslims as a monolithic community. Both white racists and Islamist fundamentalists portray Muslims as a single political community. But also liberals and progressives in the UK do not help when they racialize Islam, as if a Muslim is born marked with signs of Islamic religiosity. This is a problem because it only strengthens the essentialist idea that in order for Muslims to belong to the "Muslim community" they have to adhere to a strict interpretation of Islam.

Islam is a religion, which people interpret in different ways according to their values. Just like the way that people born into Christian communities can be religious or not, educated or not, black or white, rich or poor, gay or straight, Protestant or Catholic, Brazilian or Filipino—and everything in between— people born into Islam have the same diversity. So one way of resisting IS agenda is to complicate the category of 'Muslim' and stop talking about it as a single socio-political category, which is monolithic, cohesive, and all-defining.

How should journalists report on terror? Polis Director Charlie Beckett discusses in his report [Fanning The Flames](#).

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