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Foreign Pulse: The ISIS mindset, and how it must be fought

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📷 Islamic State fighters (Photo: AFP)

On May 26, buses plying Coptic Christian pilgrims to a monastery in Egypt's Minya governorate were waylaid by masked gunmen. The ambushers ordered passengers out, lined them up and demanded that they recite the Shahada, the Muslim profession of faith. Those who refused or couldn't do so were shot point blank. Twenty-nine innocent civilians, including children, were killed in cold blood. It was another busy working day for holy warriors of the Islamic State (ISIS), which claimed one of its "security detachments" had carried out the act. On May 22, a Libyan ISIS operative arrived outside a packed musical concert arena in Manchester, northern England, and blew himself up with powerful explosives. Altogether 22 civilians, including children, who had come for a night of entertainment were killed. ISIS proudly owned up and eulogised "one of the soldiers of the Caliphate" who succeeded in "terrorising the polytheists in response to their transgressions against the homes of Muslims". Menacingly, ISIS also threatened "what is coming is tougher and worse for the worshippers of the Cross and their helpers".

Reminding its faithful that violence during Ramzan, the Muslim holy month of fasting, earns extra piety, it said "targeting of the so-called innocents and civilians is beloved

by us and the most effective, so go forth and may you get a great reward or martyrdom". This message resonated worldwide and quickly inspired terrorist attacks from Khost in eastern Afghanistan to Marawi in southern Philippines. ISIS' opponents within the Muslim community often say that there is "nothing Islamic about ISIS", and one should stop referring to it as "Islamic" State as it violates the essentially peaceful form of a religion followed by 1.8 billion people. However, disowning ISIS and rejecting its claim to represent Islam is a cop-out that harms the urgent need to combat this global demon. Dismissing ISIS as deviants or perverts who don't follow real Islam denies a basis for thorough understanding of jihadi ideas, ideologies and mindsets. It removes the politico-religious context and motivation which produces the virus afflicting young men in as many as 100 countries who have fallen for ISIS' appeal.

Two recent books on ISIS — *The Way of Strangers* by Graeme Wood of *The Atlantic*, and *The Master Plan* by Brian Fishman of the New America Foundation — make a common point that although this monstrous terrorist movement is far from the nonviolent quotidian Islam practised by most Muslims, it is still one strand of Islamist orthodoxy. ISIS is not concocted from thin air but is predicated on the old Islamist principle of takfir — the tendency of declaring large segments of Muslims belonging to minority sects as apostates or non-believers, and targeting them for excommunication and elimination. It is by appealing to the takfir concept, that is well lodged in the history of Sunni Islam, that ISIS is able to attract tens of thousands to its fold from every corner of the globe to wage war on Shias, Kurds and moderate Sunnis who are all Muslims but "heretic". The severe brutality with which ISIS followers have been exterminating fellow Muslims conveys that one must discern the schisms within Islam that are theological as well as political to truly apprise the nature of the beast. Rejecting ISIS as not at all Islamic is to whitewash the long background of intramural warfare and competition for power among different Muslim communities over centuries. There never has been a homogeneous Islam across space and time, and ISIS happens to be one of its strands.

ISIS' worldview rests on pre-existing Wahhabi and Salafi doctrines, which designate sub-human status for non-Muslims. A special edition of ISIS' Dabiq magazine entitled "Breaking the Cross" addresses Christians with an ultimatum: "abandon infidelity and accept Islam, the religion of sincerity and submission to the Lord of the heavens and the earth". It lists examples of non-Muslim monarchs who refused to convert to Islam and suffered a bloody end and contrasts them to some pragmatic non-Muslim kings who adopted Islam or at least paid the jizya tax to Islamic rulers and thereby saved themselves from beheading. It then argues that "the same choices are in place before the disbelieving Christians today", namely conversion, paying jizya and earning peace "albeit in a state of humiliation", or evisceration. The institution of a Caliphate and repeated references to the medieval Crusades are key tropes in the ISIS lore as they strike a chord among some Sunni Muslims whose psyche harks back to the martial history of Islamic sovereigns as they jostled for land and wealth with Christian peers. The particular vehemence with which ISIS has enslaved or attempted to wipe out non-Muslim minorities like Yazidis, Assyrians, Chaldeans, and Druze has generated a situation where total genocide of these communities is a real possibility.

The plight of Christians in Egypt and Iraq is an alarm bell that the old Salafi project of "establishing sovereignty" on land seen as occupied or dominated by non-Muslims is alive and kicking. Even in India, the rejection of democracy and coexistence with non-Muslims that has been openly expressed by ISIS sympathisers and recruiters is a sign that the civilisational clash in the mental universe of jihadists is thriving. The only way to defeat this diabolical force is to recognise that the strong ideological conviction and zeal that ISIS has triggered to spur hatred of apostates and non-believers is not a newly-invented phenomenon but part of a lineage of thought that goes back to the earliest days of Islam's divisions and struggles. A grand coalition of Muslims and non-Muslims alone can eventually prevail over ISIS. But that can only happen if we shed escapism and reductionism. ISIS is a virulent variant of Islamic tradition and there are no two ways about it.

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