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The Islamic State (IS) and *al-Qa'ida*: Ideology and Practice

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In March 2015, *The Atlantic* published [an essay by Graeme Wood](#) that was subtitled, “What is the Islamic State?” Wood claimed that the IS is not just a band of psychopaths or terrorists but a religious group with a set of beliefs that are anchored in an apocalyptic worldview. Wood’s article raised a broad debate, principally about how Islamic the “Islamic State” really is. Some scholars, such as the historian Faisal Devji, characterize the Islamic State, and *al-Qa'ida* as well, as social movements, similar to the radical, violent, and global movements that emerged in response to identity crises. To support this characterization, Devji argues that the Islamic State “[is dominated by a hatred of all historical, sociological, and ideological depth,](#)” but in doing so Devji may be underestimating the efforts of these groups to root their actions and worldview in Islamic law and history. This analysis will examine the ideology and goals of the two groups, as expressed in their respective English-language publications, *al-Qa'ida's Inspire*, and the Islamic State’s *Dabiq*.

The first issue of *Inspire* was published in the summer of 2010 by *al-Qa'ida's* Arabian Peninsula branch (AQAP); since then, there have been 13 additional issues. The publication takes its name from Verse 65 of the Qur’an — the al-Anfal Sura (“The Spoils of War”): “Oh Prophet! Rouse the believers to fight”— which urged Muslims to turn to *jihad* in the path of God and to embrace Salafi Islam (the Islam of *salaf al-salih* or the pious forefathers) as the true Islamic tradition. The magazine targets Muslims across the world whose first or second language is English. *Al-Qa'ida* presents itself as the defender of all Muslims and oppressed nations against Western hegemony. Its vision is a unified *ummah* (“community of believers”) based on the concept of *tawhid* (the unity of God, or strict monotheism). There is to be no compromise on the *shari'a* (Islamic law) and no respect for international agreements that permit the desecration of Muslim

lands. *Al-Qa'ida's* goal is not to eliminate existing states and establish others in their place, but to unite all Muslim lands under *shari'a* law. In the eyes of *al-Qa'ida*, secularism and democracy are man-made religions that sow the seeds of destruction and evil in the world. The helplessness of secular governments to justly manage the problems of the day, according to *al-Qa'ida*, proves the weakness of their laws in contrast to the divine law of the *shari'a*.

On the first page of *Inspire's* inaugural issue, *al-Qa'ida* explains the central role of jihad to its readers: "Our concern for the ummah is worldwide and thus we try to touch upon all major issues... Jihad has been deconstructed in our age and thus its revival in comprehension and endeavor is of utmost importance for the Caliphate's manifestation." *Jihad* is a divine obligation as well as a personal duty (*fard 'ayn*). It is incumbent on all Muslims as a group, or as individuals, until the end of time, because the war against the false messiah is permanent. But *al-Qa'ida's* *jihad* is defensive. It is a reaction to Western aggression against Islam and Muslims. It maintains that "If the West stops attacking us, we will stop attacking it."

In a series of articles published in a section called "The Jihadi Experiences," *al-Qa'ida* ideologue Abu Mus'ab al-Suri attempted to determine concrete goals for *jihad* by outlining aspects of *jihad* presented in the various schools of Islamic law. Al-Suri put the "lone-wolf" activist at the center of his worldview. According to al-Suri, Muslims in the West have a responsibility to live according to Islamic law and to remember that in practice it is forbidden to live among non-Muslims. If they don't have the ability to live according to their religion, then they must either emigrate (*hijra*) or take up *jihad* in the West, whether it is individual *jihad* or connecting with fellow Muslims engaged in *jihad*. *Inspire* regularly dedicates a section of the magazine to Muslims in the West that were recruited to *al-Qa'ida's* cause.

The Shi'a – referred to by Salafis as *rafida*, "those who reject" – and Iran are often featured in *Inspire*. The Shi'is and Iran are presented as one leg of a triangle of enemies confronting the ummah. The Zionist-Crusader alliance and unbeliever Arab regimes are the other two legs. The fourth issue of *Inspire* contained an article boasting of the damage *al-Qa'ida* had inflicted on the latter two legs of the triangle, and announced its intention to attack the third side of the "evil triangle" — the Shi'a. The tenth issue of *Inspire*, which marked the tenth anniversary of the September 11, 2001 attacks, contained an article that attacked the then Iranian president, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, who claimed that the attacks were the product of an American conspiracy and not carried out by *al-Qa'ida*.

Although it touches on theoretical questions and faith, *Inspire* is first and foremost a guide to action for its followers. More than half of each issue is dedicated to operational issues, like how to use and prepare explosives and explosive vests or belts for suicide bombers. However, since the emergence of the Islamic State, *Inspire* has made an effort to differentiate *al-Qa'ida's* ideological positions from the Islamic State. *Jabhat al-Nusra*, *al-Qa'ida's* affiliate in Syria, has recently published its own magazine, [al-Risala](#), which explicitly challenges many of the ideological positions of the Islamic State.

Dabiq replaced the Islamic State's two previous publications – *Islamic State News* and *Islamic State Report* – and is translated into a number of languages. The first issue appeared in June 2014, and since then there have been 12 additional issues. The magazine's name is derived from the site of the battle between the Ottoman Empire and the Mamluk Sultanate in 1516, which led to the establishment of the last Islamic Caliphate. According to Islamic tradition, *Dabiq* is where, at the end of days, unbelievers will be defeated at the hands of Muslims, who will then victoriously march on Constantinople and Rome. The name of the magazine thus reveals the pronounced apocalyptic worldview of the Islamic State, which is the organization's driving force. The IS neatly divides the world into two camps: the camp of Islam and the camp of unbelief and hypocrisy; the camp of Muslims and *mujahidin*, and the camp of Crusaders and their state allies, led by the U.S. and Russia, and driven by the Jews.

A significant number of articles in *Dabiq* have directly targeted *al-Qa'ida's* ideological positions. They lambasted *al-Qa'ida* for deviating from the path of Usama bin Laden, attacking Ayman al-Zawahiri for refusing to declare Shi'is unbelievers and thus the legitimate object of *takfir* ("accusation of apostasy"), which is punishable by death. *Dabiq* also attacked *al-Qa'ida's* endorsement of short-lived Mohammed Morsi's Muslim Brotherhood dominated government in Egypt; its definition of *jihad* as public protests in order to win popular support during the Arab Spring; and its cooperation with national, secular, and "Crusader" forces in the Syrian war and other places. *Al-Qa'ida*, for its part, views the Islamic State as *khawarij* (a seventh century Islamic sect that is viewed by Sunnis as deviant).

One of the IS's central ideological concepts that is addressed in almost every issue of *Dabiq* is the term *hijra* (migration). The first issue contained a special appeal for doctors, scientists, engineers, and Muslim professionals to make *hijra* and aid their Muslim brothers in war and thus earn God's favor twice over. The Islamic literature gives deep meaning to the expression *muhajir* (one who migrates) because it is viewed as acting in the footsteps of Prophet Mohammed, who left home to search for a new life in order to establish his religion and

strengthen his community. *Dabiq* calls on Muslims in the West to abandon the lands of unbelief, to migrate to the newly established Islamic State and live according to the *shari'a*. The whole world belongs to God (*Allah*), but it is divided between the land of Islam (*dar al-Islam*) and the land of war (*dar al-harb*). *Hijra* to the land of Islam is a personal obligation for every capable Muslim, exactly like *jihad*. *Hijra* is also a permanent obligation whenever there is active *jihad*. On these grounds, the Islamic State harshly criticizes the Syrian refugees fleeing to Europe, and indeed all Muslims that migrate to the West.

The importance of *hijra* in Islam transcends the discussion that appears in *Dabiq*. *Hijra* is undertaken to define and consolidate the Muslim identity of a nascent Muslim society. The perception of the doctrine of *hijra*, like other Islamic concepts, adapts itself to the changing political, social, and economic contexts. There are different models of *hijra* but they all focus on the life of the Prophet. The Prophet's model included returning from his *hijra* to the place from which he migrated, Mecca, to purify it from corruption and apply the *shari'a*. But *hijra* can also be interpreted from another perspective: the staying power of the Prophet's unceasing effort to Islamicize the daily life of his society.

This leads to an important distinction between *al-Qa'ida*'s and the Islamic State's approach to *hijra*. *Al-Qa'ida* sees *hijra* as an Islamic ideal. They accept the reality of Muslims in foreign lands, as long as those Muslims are ready to support their jihadist activities against the society of unbelievers in which they live and turn their communities of Muslims in the West into the beating heart of Islamic *jihad*. The Islamic State, very much in need of additional manpower in the land of Islam it has conquered, promotes the *hijra* to that land as an urgent obligation in order to further the consolidation and stabilization of its state-building project.

Graeme Wood's piece in *The Atlantic* points out that it is easy to say that the Islamic State is a "problem with Islam." There are many different ways to interpret Islam, and the supporters of the Islamic State are responsible for the interpretation that they have chosen. But to condemn the Islamic State as un-Islamic is not helpful either, especially to someone who reads the sacred Islamic texts and bases his/her life on them. This is the reason that the religious leaders of Al Azhar (one of the Sunni world's most distinguished centers for Islamic education) can not condemn members of the Islamic State as unbelievers. The Islamic State is a brutal, violent organization that was established on religious-ideological faith. It integrates social, political, and civil activities, and was built on three pillars: organized violence (military), religio-ideological belief, and social-political action. It is trying to create a new order that is in line with its Islamic worldview, which is based on the group's interpretation of what took place during the life of the Prophet. It is worth bearing in mind that the Islamic State

and *al-Qa'ida* did not grow powerful because of the existence of one sacred Islamic text or another, but as a result of specific political, social, and economic conditions that allowed for those texts to be used to support their interpretation of Islam.

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