A Middle Eastern "Apocalypse Now":
The Islamic State (IS) as a Social and Cultural Phenomenon
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In recent months many senior officials in the American administration, led by President Donald Trump, have claimed that "the days of the Caliphate are numbered." More recently, Trump has claimed (prematurely) that all of territory once held by the Islamic State (IS) has been retaken. American optimism stems from a series of defeats IS suffered in Iraq and in Syria, which now controls only a small number of enclaves clustered along the Syria-Iraq border. This optimism nonetheless requires a critical examination, as well as an explanation of the roots of the Islamic State phenomenon that has swept through the region during the past five years.

The Islamic State tried to undo changes that were introduced in the Middle East during the past two hundred years of interaction with the West. It rejected creation of nation-states and the borders that were drawn after World War One by victorious Western powers; the values that were shaped by Western law and Western cultural influence on dress and social norms; and the system of values that address individual rights, freedom of speech and association, and respect for ethnic and religious minorities. These were all seen as representations of a twisted world fashioned and imposed by the West. In their place, it promoted an alternative social and cultural system, including a puritanical implementation of *Shari'a* law based solely on one interpretation, without justifying or apologizing for elements that consisted of radical deviations from acceptable norms.

The rise of the Islamic State represents deep trends that are taking place in Arab society in general and among the younger generations in particular. The Islamic State seems to be, to a large extent, an extreme expression of the voice of the

Y-generation in the Middle East, which emerged in the 1990s, inspired by the political, social, communication, and cultural developments that swept through the world as a whole. The ages of the Islamic State's members demonstrate that this is, in fact, an organization built on the region's younger generations. The Islamic State has attracted young people, and even children and teenagers. They represent, to a large extent, the deep social crisis that is a product of the destruction of the social frameworks from which they emerged. Their lives are shrouded in the zeal of a vision of a new order, erasing the miserable past they have known. The masses of young people from North Africa, Iraq, Syria, Jordan, Gaza, Saudi Arabia, and even from Central Asia and East Asia, are driven by very similar issues as were people who partook in the great revolutions of the twentieth century. These are young people that are disconnected from a family or "traditional" cultural space and who join revolutionary movements that seek to destroy the "old order" and to erect a "new world." For many young people that perceive themselves to be "pioneers," the Islamic State is seen as a "new family" that provides father figures, similar to the role Stalin assumed in the Soviet Union, or Pol Pot in Cambodia's "new family order." Like the model of the Muslim fighters in Afghanistan (1980s) or Chechnya (1990s) in the past, they joined the ranks of a revolutionary movement that brought meaning to their lives and offered them a personal and ideological horizon that could not be found in the poverty-stricken places where they were born and raised, which provided few opportunities for youth.

The profile of young people joining the Islamic State's ranks can be defined as torn, alienated, and detached. This is a generation that has despaired of the opportunity to achieve the attractions of the Western world seen on their television screens and mobile phones. The social network space is dominant in the lives of young Arabs and Muslims today, and it is also fertile ground for the Islamic State. The Islamic State and the digital entertainment world share same source of inspiration, which is easily accessed through a short "click" on a computer keyboard or smartphone. Like any other reality show, video clip or online game, the Islamic State offers young people, through the digital world, answers that are clear, short and certain, and above all, have a sense of meaning. Salah al-Din Barakat, an imam of Lebanese origin from the Malmo, Sweden, provided a clear expression of the Islamic State's appeal: "The young people that travel to Syria did not grow up studying the *Qur'an*. They grew up watching video games, Hollywood, and MTV. This is a culture filled with violence, and when you watch ISIS's videos, you see that young people are not called

to the world of religion, they are called to the world of computer games and action books."[1]

The "IS phenomenon" has developed alongside a parallel trend that has seen an unprecedented number of young people in the Arab world embracing elements of Western culture. This trend has contributed to individual and collective aspirations in the spirit of self-realization, career advancement and education, along with cynicism and sometimes contempt for the traditional sources of authority (governments and social leadership) and the desire to free themselves from the chains of tradition, which is especially evident among women. The two trends emerge, as stated, from the digital and online network space, and there is a symbiotic relationship between them. As the frustration of young people deepened as a result of the inability to achieve their individual aspirations that were influenced by Western culture to which they were exposed, frustration grew, and as a result, some turned to the Islamic State.

The Islamic State provides a meaning not only to teenagers in the Arab and Muslim world but also to many Arabs and Muslims living in the West. For them, the Islamic State is a refuge from the cumulative despair that has resulted from their problems integrating into the societies and cultural space in which their parents' generation settled. The Islamic State serves as a means to release frustration and to "avenge" their estranged childhoods. The thousands of Muslims from Germany, Britain, France, and Belgium that joined the Islamic State's ranks in recent years reflect a deeper cultural phenomenon that characterizes Muslim communities in the West and poses a serious problem for European countries. The loathing of some of the Muslim youth for the places in which they were born, raised, and educated is reflected in the Islamic State's appeal as a powerful solution. In the same sense, it also represents the limitations of the Western education system's influence on these young Muslims.

The Tunisian author, Hadi Yahmed, in his bestselling book, "I Was in Raqqa…The fugitive from the Islamic State," presented a concrete expression of the various contradictions facing a young Arab today, which led him to join the ranks of the Islamic State. The protagonist in the book, Mohamed Fahem, is a young person that was born in Dortmund, Germany, in 1990, to a migrant Tunisian family that returned to Tunisia when Fahem was a child due to a fear of a moral decline influenced by Western society. Tunisia in those years, ruled by Zine El Abidine Ben

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[1] David Stavrou, "Is the Muslim Community in Sweden a New Front in the Culture War or an Opening for Coexistence?," *Ha'aretz*, February 18, 2015.

Ali, was the "fertile ground" for Fahem's evolution into a radical Salafi activist – the feeling of a lack of horizon that characterizes the majority of Tunisia's younger generation; deep alienation from the corrupt regime; a period in the state's abusive prison system, where he was exposed to young radical. The book, which was published in 2017, outlines the Fahem's winding path to the Islamic State: his release from the Tunisian prison, his arrival in Syria, his fighting for the Islamic State, and his subsequent disillusionment with the organization, which ultimately led him to abandon it.[2]

'Abdel Bari Atwan, the former editor-in-chief of the newspaper, *al-Quds al-Arabi*, and the Palestinian commentator, Hussam Shaker, also address the cultural roots of the Islamic State in their recent work. According to them, the Islamic State was the product of the widespread failure of the Arab world that deeply affected the younger generation. The Arab regimes that were characterized by tyranny and corruption, inadequate educational systems, and political, economic, and social leadership failed to address the growing poverty, unemployment, and alienation in their societies. According to their analyses, the Islamic State draws a significant portion of its zeal from the deep existential frustration that exists among the Arab youth, and their alienation from all the sources of authority that surround them, as well as from the secular ideologies that were supposed to guide their lives.[3]

The Islamic State is a fusion of the new and the old. On the one hand, this phenomenon possesses innovative dimensions that seek to destroy the signs of an old political, cultural, and public world, and in its place, create a new order, with a new legal system, currency, flag, state, and calendar, a distinct political system, and most importantly, new sources of identity for both the individual and the collective, which are completely divorced from the sources of national identity that derived from Western notions of state and nation.

On the other hand, the Islamic state is not "completely new." Notwithstanding the animosity towards Western progress, the organization adopts many of the features of modernity, especially in how it approaches communication: widespread use of social media; conducting (unofficial) trade relations with the outside world; and even distribution of periodicals in various languages, that are directed at individuals perceived as non-believers, as well as at Muslims residing in the West, who do not

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[2] Hadi Yahmed, *I Was in Raqqa: The Fugitive from the Islamic State* [Arabic] (Tunis: Editions Arabesques, 2017).

[3] 'Abdel Bari Atwan, *The Islamic State* (Beirut: Al Saqi, 2015), pp.15-16; Hossam Shaker, "The ISIS phenomenon and discussion that has not yet begun," *Al Jazeera*, August 26, 2014.

speak the languages of the Islamic world. Furthermore, the Islamic State embodies many of the political, cultural, and ideological patterns that have distinguished the Middle East, not only in recent decades but in recent centuries, albeit in a very extreme and unprecedented way. The upheaval that followed the "Arab Spring" uprisings and the American occupation of Iraq exposed these core political, cultural, and ideological patterns that had already existed in the past: strong enmity towards the West; deep-seated tensions between different religions and ethnic groups; and, a radical interpretation of Islamic law. The seeds of disaster, therefore, were planted in the past, but the current circumstances have allowed them to grow and spread relatively quickly, all of which were embodied in the Islamic State's image.

Those warning against the premature declaration of the IS's defeat can be found both in the West and in the Arab world. ʿAbd al-Sattar al-Khademi, a Tunisian journalist, warned against the "victory celebrations of the end of ISIS," arguing that the Islamic State's primary stronghold lies in the consciousness of youth.[4] Moreover, General John Allen, who served as the U.S. president's special envoy to the international coalition to defeat the Islamic State, declared that "until we defeat the idea behind ISIS, the organization will not be truly defeated."[5] Even if the Islamic State continues to suffer military defeats and lose all of its territorial enclaves, the idea that it represents still exists in the minds of many of the younger generation in the Middle East. And the organization draws its strength from core social and economic problems that exist in the region, which appear to be getting worse. A real eradication of the "ISIS phenomenon" will not only require military strength in the Arab world or foreign military assistance, but also a serious reckoning with contemporary cultural challenges in the Islamic world, especially by the gate-keepers who control the media, education system, religious establishment, as well as by cultural and societal elites.

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[4] ʿAbd al-Sattar al-Khademi, "ISIS: A phenomenon capable of reproduction [Arabic]," *al-Arab* (London), July 19, 2017.

[5] An interview by Attila Shomfalvi and Alexandra Lukash with American General, John Allen: "ISIS has not been defeated, this is a war on ideas [Hebrew]," *Ynet*, January 30, 2019.

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