Countering ISIS Ideological Threat: Reclaim Islam's Intellectual Traditions

By Mohamed Bin Ali

Synopsis

The terrorist attacks in Paris and Jakarta and the recent arrest of ISIS-leaning Bangladeshi nationals in Singapore clearly highlights the enduring pervasiveness of the ISIS ideological threat. Reclaiming Islamic intellectual traditions will be critical to deal with the threat.

Commentary

INCREASINGLY, ISIS terror attacks are commanding the centre stage of global politics and international relations. This concept of terror in the name of Islam has overwhelmed the perceptions of Islam in many ways.

A root cause of Islamist terrorism is the current intellectual crisis in the Muslim world. Returning to the Islamic intellectual traditions will be critical to counter ISIS narratives and extremist ideas in general.

Islamic Intellectual Traditions

Islamic intellectual tradition is fundamentally based on what the religion enjoins as true knowledge. The pursuit of knowledge is a central message of Islam. This body of knowledge is not static but Muslims are guided to distinguish between false and true knowledge. In Islam, knowledge consists of three pillars: the divine verses (Quran), authentic *Hadith* (Prophetic Traditions) and prescriptions rightly deduced from the two. Other than these, all else is superfluous. Hence, Muslims are encouraged to study the basics of their religion (Quran and Hadith) first, as these will then serve as the guiding light for all forms of other derived knowledge.

Another significant feature of the Islamic intellectual traditions is their holistic nature: the pursuit of knowledge must go hand-in-hand with the development of one's character. A student who seeks knowledge but neglects the development of his or her moral values and normative behaviour (summed up as *adab* and *akhlaq*) risks deviating from the path of religion, using the religious knowledge for less noble worldly gain.

This holistic pursuit of knowledge was the standard practice for the early Muslims. A classic example is the group of Muslims who dedicated themselves to the study, preservation and application of the teachings of Prophet Muhammad (*Ahl-Hadith*). Considering themselves guardians of the authentic preservation of the Prophet's traditions for many generations of Muslims to come, they understood the importance of cultivating an unadulterated and accurate mode of perception and understanding.

Fallacies of ISIS Ideology

ISIS ideology is defined as a religious doctrine which advocates literalistic interpretations of the sacred texts of Islam and the Shariah laws. The followers of ISIS approached the need to "purge" the religion of non-Islamic influences by advocating a return to the way of life of the Prophet and the early Muslims. Islamic law and Islamic state become the prerequisites to realise their ambitions. This earned them the label Islamic fundamentalists, in parallel with the same meaning of the term with reference to Christianity.

Yet, ironically, though ISIS claim to reject "anything Western", their thought processes and methodologies betray a pervasive influence of Western thought and its leading concepts and ideology. For instance, by suggesting force, that is "seizure of power" to achieve their goals of an Islamic society, ISIS are employing an ideology that is closer to fascism than to Islam.

In their fervour to return to a 'pure' interpretation of the religion, ISIS profess a strict adherence to the Quran and Hadith while strongly rejecting any kind of rationalist orientation present in a wide variety of Islamic intellectual teachings. By closing the avenues for analysis, deliberation and debate, they cut themselves off from the rich tradition of past Muslim scholars.

Distortion of Jihad

ISIS followers do not adhere to the classical prescriptions for addressing jihad and war. Their ideology largely rests upon the centrality of armed jihad to achieve their aims. Hence, armed jihad becomes the means to expand the territories of Islam and Muslim control to realise Islamic ideals. To justify their resort to violence, they define jihad as fighting alone.

ISIS ideology is at odds with nearly all Islamic religious thought. Firstly, ISIS ideologues are often non-religious authorities, thus they exhibit very limited religious knowledge compared to the Muslim scholars of the past: their writings are deprived of the legalistic arguments of scholars of the past, they fail to differentiate between schools of Islamic law or propose solutions for all potential situations.

This was the case with the so-called father of jihadism, Sayid Qutb, who pursued a secular education, rather than any form of religious training. The same can be said of Osama bin Laden, who did not receive any formal training as a religious scholar and Ayman al-Zawahiri who was a medical doctor by training.

Secondly, their arguments are couched in dramatic language targeted at provoking emotions and demanding actions by emphasising the moral justifications and the underlying ethical values of the rules, rather the detailed elaboration of those rules. They also have the tendency to quote selective portions of the Quranic verses to justify their arguments. For example, ISIS legitimises the killing civilians as acts of self-defence and rightful revenge for the killing of innocents in Palestine, Iraq, Syria and elsewhere.

This was because though there are authentic prophetic Hadith forbidding the killing of children and women, ISIS claim that there were other writings which allowed it, while selectively quoting the Quran for justification. Take this verse for example: "*And if you punish (your enemy, O You believers in the Oneness of God), then punish them with the like of that with which you were afflicted*". What ISIS failed to add was the verse which ended with, *"but if you endure patiently, verily, it is better for As-Sabirin (the Patient Ones).")*

Return to Islamic Intellectual Traditions

In attempting to prescribe solutions to the problem of ISIS ideology and extremism in Islam, some suggest that the only way for Muslims to counter extremism is by rejecting religiosity and embracing secular, liberal values. Yet, given that the problem is not Islam per se but an aberration to the faith, the most logical path for Muslims to take is to return to the true Islamic teachings and tradition, which effectively means understanding and becoming better practising Muslims.

The drive to prevail over ISIS' ideological threat must begin with an accurate understanding of the threat. The religion of Islam is undergoing a significant revolution due to the pervasive ideological pressures. The extremists consist of people who draw upon a long tradition of extreme intolerance that does not distinguish politics from religion and distorts both. Extremists believe that their immoral acts of violence are moral and that they are on the right path to God. An enhanced understanding through increased debates and open dialogue about the nature of religious extremists will better assist policy makers to deal with those issues.

Muslims urgently need to reclaim their intellectual traditions so that they can make Islam relevant in today's world. In this respect, creating institutions of authority and credible Muslim scholars for guidance and enlightenment is paramount. Muslim leaders should also continue to upgrade their knowledge and be equally versatile in both religious and contemporary issues in the rapidly changing world. This is especially critical as Muslims become better-educated, more widely traveled and more exposed to the divergent views on many issues pertaining to Islam and its practical application in everyday life.

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