ISIS in Context
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UCLA International Institute, April 21, 2015 — The Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS; also known as IS, ISIL, and Daesh) did not spring out of nowhere in the summer of 2014. Rather, its roots can be traced to al-Qaida in Iraq, radical Islamist ideological beliefs that ISIS shares with the original al-Qaida organization and a tradition of Islamic jurisprudence that hued close to that of Wahhabi jurisprudence.

Although ISIS appears to be spreading through affiliates in Nigeria and Tunisia, these “affiliates” are far more likely local extremist groups who are re-branding themselves for publicity purposes. The group arose in the specific local context of northern Iraq and remains fragile in terms of both its capacity and staying power. Its practice of enslaving female captives, moreover, must be seen in the context of migrant labor and marital practices in the Gulf States over the past several decades, which have acculturated a generation of people to the idea of people owning people.

These were some of the principal arguments made in several public talks held at UCLA over the past few months, the major points of are distilled in this article.

Roots

According to UCLA historian James Gelvin, ISIS “evolved in parallel but not out of al-Qaida” and has in most circumstances been in direct conflict with it. Gelvin traced the origins of ISIS to 1989, when Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, a native of Jordan, went to fight in Afghanistan. Rather than join al-Qaida, however, al-Zarqawi created his own group dedicated to the idea of building an Islamic state.

“Zarqawi was not a copycat of Bin Laden,” noted political geographer Ali Hamdan, “he wanted to preserve a vision of radical Islam that differed from that of al-Qaida.” After fleeing Afghanistan, the jihadist landed in Iran and later, Iraq, where by 2003 he had created the network that became al-Qaida in Iraq.

Islamic law and human rights expert Khaled Abou El Fadl noted that when the United States was planning to invade Iraq, al-Qaida — which had few contacts in Iraq — was looking to recruit people to send to there and lay low until after the invasion. Although Zarqawi agreed to act as the agent for al-Qaida in the country, his primary goal was “to overthrow the apostate state of Iraq and establish an Islamic state there,” he said, a goal that al-Qaida considered premature. Gelvin noted that the new name of al-Zarqawi’s group, “Al-Qaida in Iraq,” was an incorrect translation, as its Arabic name referred to the greater region and not Iraq alone.

In Abou El Fadl’s estimation, Zarqawi was “rabidly sectarian,” a man who considered Shi’ites a fifth column in Islam and sought to ignite a sectarian war that would make the American occupation of Iraq
too costly for the United States. The assassination of Muhmamed Baqir al-Habim, a prominent Shia jurist (and leader of the Supreme Council for the Islamic Revolution in Iraq), in the holy Shia site of Najaf launched al-Zarqawi’s campaign, which also included attacks on the Jordanian Embassy and the headquarters of the United Nations in Iraq.

Eventually, Sunni Arab tribes in Iraq agreed to help fight his organization and Al-Zarqawi was killed in a U.S. airstrike in 2006. His organization then went underground and after undergoing a number of permutations, it became the Islamic State of Iraq before being taken over by Abu Omar al-Baghdadi (a native Iraqi born in Samara in 1971).

Al-Baghdadi concentrated his efforts on Iraq and considered the uprising against the Bashar al-Assad regime in Syria a sideshow, said Gelvin. Nevertheless, he sent fellow jihadist Abu Muhammad al-Julani to Syria, where the latter established Jabhat al-Nusra (also known as the al-Nusra Front). However, Gelvin continued, al-Nusra concentrated on waging jihad against Assad in Syria and Syria alone, winning many battles in the Syrian civil war and eventually coming into open competition with ISIS. The latter then concentrated its efforts in Syria on fighting al-Nusra, supported in this goal by Syrian President Bashar Al-Assad and the Syrian Army, who opened up Syrian prisons to release jihadist fighters.

In 2013, al-Baghdadi formally broke with al-Qaida. In summer 2014, his renamed Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant launched the lightning military strike that gave it control of a large swathe of territory in eastern Syria and northern Iraq and declared an Islamic caliphate. Because it “began as a terrorist movement anchored in a certain native soil,” said Abou el Fadl, ISIS was able draw on local supporters and spread outwards with the collapse of various resistance movements in Syria – drawing people to the idea of the caliphate as the solution.

The territorial conquests of ISIS had little to do with its leadership or military prowess, said Gelvin. Rather, said the historian, its conquests can be attributed to a number of factors: the military help provided by Baathist groups and allied Sunni tribes in Iraq; the legacy of the brutal suppression of the spring 2014 protest movement of Iraqi Sunnis against the Nouri al-Maliki government; the hatred of those Sunnis for al-Maliki’s crony-based, sectarian Shia government; the concentration of oil-producing facilities in the areas of Syria and Iraq seized by ISIS (enabling the group to finance itself); and a slick media campaign that attracted foreign fighters.

Hamdan argued that ISIS has been successful in specific places due to specific circumstances, noting that the Syrian part of the region it seized was devastated by drought in the 1990s, while the Iraqi part was marginalized by after the U.S. invasion in 2003. He pointed out that the territory occupied by ISIS is a functional geographical region known as the Jazira: the “island” or peninsula between the Tigris and Euphrates rivers. Traditionally comprised of what are now northwest Iraq, northeast Syria and southeast Turkey, the Jazira has a long history of being recognized as a distinct region, he said, and was divided by French and British after World War I.

“ISIS,” asserted Hamdan, “has completely overwhelmed the story that the media is telling about the Syrian civil war” by reducing that war to its own black-and-white dichotomies. “While we debate ISIS,” he noted, “Al Assad is dropping barrel bombs in northern Syria.” Because it is almost impossible to get into ISIS territory, he noted that the group is able to control “what people see it and when they see it” via a robust media strategy featuring well-produced videos and extensive use of social media.

I ideological beliefs

Abou el Fadl pointed out that both al-Qaida and ISIS grew out of an ideological dogma inspired by Wahhabi theology. Both ascribe to idea of takfir, he said, believing that they are the true Muslims and that everyone who disagrees with their understanding of Islam are apostates (i.e., people who have renounced their religion).

They see themselves as fighting the sects of apostasy (i.e., the Shia, the Sufis, others who disagree with their conception of monotheism) and consider anyone who commits a whole range of sins as being immediately cast out of the faith, he continued.
Where they differ with later Wahhabism, he noted, is in their rejection of the doctrine that all Muslims must obey their ruler, regardless of whether he is good or bad, just or unjust.

Gelvin noted that al-Qaida is particularly opposed to declaring Shia to be non-Muslims (a contention that ISIS uses to justify their killing) and cited an early letter to al-Zarqawi in which deputy al-Qaida leader Ayman al-Zawahiri denounced the concept of *takfir*.

Although ISIS cultivates a mythology about its caliphate having developed a system of morals and principles “unadulterated and uncontaminated by anything that comes from anywhere else,” said Abou El Fadl, “it just so happens that the jurisprudence that it ends up resting on, or accepting, is jurisprudence that closely mimics the jurisprudence of Wahhabi jurists.”

The legal scholar noted that two critical ideological texts inform the theological teachings of both al-Qaida and ISIS: “Managing Barbarity” (or “Managing Barbarism,” often incorrectly translated as “Managing Savagery”) and “The Manifesto of International Islamic Resistance.” The first quotes Samuel Huntington and depicts the world as being in a constant state of civilizational conflict, contending that when civilizations are at their peak of power, they become savage or barbaric. The only solution to this situation, says the text, is to engage such civilizations in prolonged wars of attrition of unpredictable violence. The goal is not just to deplete them economically, but more importantly, to force them to abandon their façade of passivity and reveal their true barbaric selves, he explained.

The “Manifesto” describes as an unrelenting war of Christians against Muslims since the birth of Islam. “Its 1,600 pages remind me very much of Islamophobic books that record every grievance against Muslims,” said Abou El Fadl, “[This] does the same thing for the Islamic side.” The most critical — and to his mind, ideologically dangerous — part of the text is its dismissal of all alternatives to an open-ended war of attrition against what the document defines as the crusading, Judeo-Christian civilization. He noted that the text specifically dismisses all previous Islamic movements in history as having led nowhere, whether they tried to work with local governments, or favored democracy, or adopted mysticism or education as the solution. Muslims, it asserts, will never be saved unless a caliphate is created.

The Yazidi genocide

ISIS justified its August 2014 slaughter of Yazidis — a predominantly Kurdish-speaking, non-Muslim minority found in Armenia, southern Turkey, northern Syria and Iraq — by its belief in *takfir*. Historian Zeynep Turkyilmaz called the massacre in Sinjar, Iraq a genocide, arguing that the ISIS campaign met the definition cited in the 1948 UN Convention against Genocide. The group removed children and women and willfully exterminated community members with the goal of eliminating them as a people. She pointed that that the Yazidi genocide occurred in the centennial anniversary year of the Armenian genocide of 1915, with the photos of Yazidis fleeing their towns very reminiscent of photos of the Armenian genocide.

Turkyilmaz estimated that perhaps 1 million Yazidis had been displaced from the Sinjar region, noting that accurate numbers were hard to come by because Yazidis for generations have tried to remain invisible from the ethnonational states in which they live in order to avoid suppression.

“What is unique about ISIS is that they openly claim [a] kind of religious model and religious ideology for their genocidal intent,” she said. “We work with a model of genocide that is, perhaps, derived from the Holocaust and we assume that the Holocaust, as the product of a modern age, needs to have all this secular baggage. But [ISIS has] is a perfectly modern identity — yes, they want to go back to the seventh century, but they are doing it in quite a modern way.”

The need to exterminate the Yazidis was an established part of the official ISIS narrative, she explained, recorded in a published document about its goals. Even before ISIS attacked the Yazidis, continued Turkyilmaz, a group of (early) Islamic scholars was discussing the identity of the Yazidis, trying to decide whether they were apostates or...
willing polytheists. In the first case, they supposedly would be given the chance to repent and return to their Islamic origins; in the second case, extermination was merited.

In the end, when ISIS fighters conquered the Sinjar region of Iraq, very few Yazidis were given the option of converting, she said. Most male Yazidis were immediately exterminated and the females were taken as slaves. Unfortunately, she observed, the practice of slavery had support in the region: people came not only from Iraq, but also from Syria, to buy Yazidi slaves.

Asked whether one can teach American students about ISIS without reinforcing western stereotypes about Muslims or confusing political and religious issues, Turkyilmaz said, “If you look at what they say, their tools, how they justify their actions: I don’t think there is anything un-Islamic about [ISIS], but it’s not the Islam. There are different ways of being Muslim and there are different interpretations of Islam. . . It’s not representative of the entire Islam.” To refuse to recognize ISIS fighters as Muslim, she noted, would be to practice takfir.

**Slavery in the context of human trafficking**

Abou el Fadl stressed that the enslavement of women by ISIS must be seen in the context of the rapid modernization, spread of cosmopolitanism and use of migrant labor in the Gulf Region over the past several decades. According to the international protocol against human trafficking,* the treatment in Gulf countries of workers from such countries as Egypt, Sri Lanka, Bangladesh, India, and Nepal amounts to human trafficking, he argued.

There are immense disparities in wealth and power between these workers and their employers, he explained. Their passports are taken, they are forced to work exceedingly long hours for very little pay, and in the case of domestic workers, they often endure both physical and sexual abuse. All of these conditions clearly violate international standards for fair labor practice,** he pointed out.

Crucially, their treatment has legitimized a culture in which the denigration of other human beings, and the idea of people owning people, has become a norm, said Abou El Fadl. “Why does this relate to ISIS?” he asked. “We are talking about building cultural associations and cultural understandings — and what ultimately people see as hypocritical or not hypocritical, as socially acceptable or social unacceptable.”

In his view, the development of misyar marital practices*** was another crucial step in this acculturation process. The defense of such marriages by Saudi and other clerics in the Gulf area has, he said, legitimized a practice in which wealthy people — mostly from the Gulf countries — travel to villages in countries like Egypt, India, and Lebanon and “pay a sum of money and marry a woman pretty much like they’re shopping.”

The legal scholar contended that the ISIS slave trade was interconnected with organized criminal networks that traffic in children and women. Although ISIS is believed to specialize in the trafficking of minorities that are neither Christian nor Jews, Abou El Fadl said that human rights organizations have found repeated cases of ISIS helping transport and sell Shia, and even Sunni, Muslim women.

Calling this trafficking a particularized problem in a larger context, Abou El Fadl lamented that the international condemnation of the enslavement of women by ISIS has not been matched by a similar condemnation of migrant labor practices that approximate slavery in the region.

**Prognosis**

Both Gelvin and Hamdan believed that ISIS was severely limited in capacity and reach and would soon crumble. Rather than attracting skilled Muslim professionals to help build its Islamic State, said Gelvin, the group is mostly attracting marginal figures motivated by bloodlust. In his opinion, President Obama, like President George W. Bush before him with respect to al-Qaida, has conflated the threat of ISIS to become a fundamental threat to the United States. “It took the American Army 80,000 soldiers to not occupy Iraq very well. ISIS has far fewer, and its success will be even less,” he said.
Hamdan noted that ISIS is most successful recruiting people who do not come from the region where the group is based, but are primarily drawn from “small, embattled communities outside of what you would traditionally call the Islamic world.” Joining ISIS appears to offer people from such communities a chance to escape the indignity of feeling unwanted in a Western society, he said. As for the group’s so-called “affiliates” in northern Africa, Hamdan claimed that they were simply existing radical groups taking advantage of an opportunity for publicity.

Turkyilmaz, however, argued that ISIS would have an enduring impact in the region. “Perhaps in the long run ISIS is not going to survive, but what it has already done is going to survive,” she said. “It has already committed a genocide that changed the demography and the political and cultural setting of the Middle East.” In particular, she doubted that the Yazidis would ever be able to return to their homes in the region.


**See the ILO Declaration on Fundamental Principles and Rights at Work (1998), which includes four fundamental principles: freedom of association and the effective recognition of the right to collective bargaining, elimination of all forms of forced or compulsory labor, effective abolition of child labor, and the elimination of the discrimination in respect of employment and occupation.

*** See discussion of misyar marriage in Oxford Islamic Studies Online, under the category of “Modern Practice.”