

Whose Caliphate? The Ideology and Geo-Politics of Islamic State

Kirstine Sinclair

News:

The threat of the pending beheading of Abdul-Rahman Kassig by Islamic State.

Summary:

Taking its point of departure in the latest threat of a pending decapitation of another Western hostage – that of Abdul-Rahman Kassig – by Islamic State, this news analysis investigates the ideology and the geo-politics of Islamic State and asks: How is one to understand the relationship between religion and politics in this line of thought? Or: Why would Islamic State threaten to kill a fellow Muslim and aid worker?

Key Words

Islamic State, Islamism, Terror

Analysis:

Since October 2013, Islamic State (IS) has held Abdul-Rahman Kassig – formerly known as Peter Kassig – hostage somewhere in Syria. Abdul-Rahman Kassig is the founder of the Lebanese based charity organisation SERA (Special Emergency Response and Assistance) which delivers medical supplies to civilians in Syria and the camps in Lebanon and Turkey¹, and a year ago, he filled a truck with emergency supplies and drove east from Aleppo towards Deir ez-Zur in order to deliver the supplies to refugees from the war zone.

Earlier in 2013, Kassig told a reporter from *Time*: “The truth is sometimes I really think I would like to do something else, but at the end of the day this work is really the only thing that I have found that gives my life both meaning and direction.”² In a letter to his parents dated June 2014, Abdul-Rahman Kassig said the following: “*If I do die, I figure that at least you and I can seek refuge and comfort in knowing that I went out as a result of trying to alleviate suffering and helping those in need.*”³ Based on such statements, it is hard not to see Abdul-Rahman Kassig as an idealistic young man – he is 26 – driven by altruism.

Abdul-Rahman Kassig converted to Islam at some point between October and December 2013, but his parents have explained in interviews that he had been taking steps towards conversion before that; that he had been searching for meaning and answers and expressing admiration for his Muslim friends, their persuasion and religious practices. In the mentioned letter to his parents, Kassig also touched on his conversion and explained: “*In terms of my faith, I pray every day and I am not angry about my situation in that sense. I am in a dogmatically complicated situation here, but I am at peace with my belief.*”⁴

Here, we are going to take a closer look at possible explanations why IS would take someone like Abdul-Rahman Kassig hostage. In order to do so, it is fruitful to take the relationship between religion and politics in IS’s ideology as well as geo-political perspectives into consideration.

¹ This article by Joshua Hersh (*The New Yorker*, 9th October 2014) tells Kassig’s story: <http://www.newyorker.com/news/news-desk/peter-kassig-beirut> (last accessed 20th Oct 2014).

² Hersh in *The New Yorker*: <http://www.newyorker.com/news/news-desk/peter-kassig-beirut> (last accessed 20th Oct 2014)

³ Sulome Anderson (*New York: News and Politics*) provides excerpts from Kassig’s letter to his parents: <http://nymag.com/daily/intelligencer/2014/10/i-am-afraid-isis-will-kill-my-friend.html> (last accessed 20th Oct 2014)

⁴ Sulome Anderson in *New York: News and Politics*: <http://nymag.com/daily/intelligencer/2014/10/i-am-afraid-isis-will-kill-my-friend.html> (last accessed 20th Oct 2014)

Islam as Ideology

It is the backbone of Islamist thinking that religion and politics cannot be separated and that Islam should be understood as an ideology. Or put differently: This understanding is one of the main aspects in the definition of Islamism. Another important component in this line of thought is that the ideal form of government is a Caliphate; i.e. a state based on the principles found in the Qur'an studied and read as an ideology and the persuasion that a state can be based on principles outlined in religious texts in the first place. Furthermore, as a rule, Islamist ideology emphasizes the need to think of all Muslims as one unified group and thus disregard differences in terms of history, ethnicity, language, practice, traditions and customs etc.

However, this is where the common features of Islamism stop. Apart from the understanding that Islam is an ideology, that the political aim is the establishment of a Caliphate and that all Muslims can and should be united politically, Islamist parties such as the Tunisian an-Nahda⁵, HAMAS, the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt, Hizb ut-Tahrir, al-Qaida and Islamic State differ dramatically in terms of views of strategy and methodology. They are, put quite bluntly, not the same thing and should not be labelled as such simply because the choice of strategy and method matters. There is an important difference between wishing to implement the caliphate by means of parliamentary processes and elections, by means of popular revolution, by means of armed struggle and war or by means of terror and public beheadings.

Now, back to the question of why IS are decapitating Western hostages including Muslim Western hostages. Whether we think IS a military power on the rise or a terror organisation, it is surprising that representatives of this entity would capture and later threaten to execute an aid worker and fellow Muslim.

IS have executed other aid workers – we have witnessed the public beheadings of James Foley, Steven Sotloff and David Haines, and latest that of Alan Henning, a British taxi driver who spent his savings travelling to Syria to help with the transportation of goods and people in need – all of whom had not been involved in fighting prior to their captivity. However, none of the first four victims were Muslims and this difference draws attention to a very important point when trying to understand IS: This entity shies away from no means in getting their message heard and seemingly the connection between the message and religion is vague.

IS as a Rational Actor

There is no reason to assume that individuals involved in IS are somehow irrational or pre-modern in their thinking, or that their actions and political project is incomprehensible. On the contrary, looking at the power relations in Iraq after the fall of Saddam Hussein, where the Shia majority was granted political influence at the cost of that of the previously privileged Sunni minority, it is not hard to imagine the frustration amongst former supporters and members of Saddam Hussein's Baathist

⁵ Please see this news coverage from 2011 from *al-Arabiya* giving an example of how An-Nahda referred to the Caliphate as an ideal: <http://english.alarabiya.net/articles/2011/11/15/177378.html> (last accessed 20th October 2014)

party. And this is exactly where IS' new Caliph comes from. The man who on 29th June 2014 announced himself head of the newly established Caliphate, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, is from the same area as Saddam Hussein (Samarra and Tikrit respectively), and Baghdadi was an influential member of the Baath party before he turned to Islamic studies at the University of Baghdad and later became a war lord in the aftermath of the US led invasion in 2003 leading to Saddam Hussein's fall.

Now, if we combine the fact that the previously influential Sunnis in Iraq with wide reaching networks of wealthy former Baathist in Amman are desperate to regain power in Iraq with the opportunities created by the Syrian civil war in terms of territory, access to oil and water (the present day main city of the IS's caliphate in Raqqa on the Euphrat) and a call for global jihad attracting big numbers of predominantly young men willing to sacrifice their lives in the name of the Caliph and God, we have the recipe for chaos in the eyes of the world society and existing states. IS have created their so-called state in less than a year!

The question is what rational individuals drawn to IS are motivated by? The answer is manifold but some of the central aspects are: Some will be attracted by the political content of IS: The territorial claims and the belief that a new Islamic State will establish a more just institutional framework for Muslims. That life in IS's state will be better than life was in Assad's Syria or Maliki's Iraq, and that they - in fighting oppressive regimes like that of Assad - are making up for injustice against Muslims everywhere. Some will be attracted by the religious content of IS's ideology: That working for IS and the Caliph is equal to practicing a religious duty and thus equal to being a better Muslim. Some will be attracted to the fight itself and find that the identity as fighters builds confidence and emphasises the brotherhood-bond.

What the three aspects have in common is that each of them, or in combination of course, give individuals something to fight for – they offer a catalogue of actions as a logical follow-up on conviction. According to Wiktorowicz (2005), who has studied Islamic activism generally and high-risk Islamic organisations in the West with special attention given to Omar Bakri Mohammed's al-Muhajiroun in Britain more specifically ('high-risk' understood as organisations where members are willing to risk imprisonment or death as a consequence of their engagement), in such high-risk groups, negative experiences are turned into positive action.

Wiktorowicz argues that individuals do not join a high-risk organisation by coincidence. Rather, they choose socialisation in a specific movement or organisation over many others, and such choices are based on what available organisations emphasise in terms of ideology and actions. Albeit, what it comes down to is finding a community in which negativity (negative emotions, frustration etc.) can be turned into positive emotions (empowerment, political motivation, belonging, confidence etc.) linked to religiosity. This corresponds with statements from former members of the Islamist but not non-violent organisation Hizb ut-Tahrir (Sinclair, 2010). In Hizb ut-Tahrir, members believe that working for the party is the same as serving God. This element is found in other social movements as well, but what is remarkable is the linkage to God. In Hizb ut-Tahrir the individual member is taught to think of party activities as services to God. Working for the party means practising the religion and

pleasing God. Thus, the founder, al-Nabhani, successfully invented and implemented an understanding whereby working to establish the caliphate, as members of Hizb ut-Tahrir, was *fard* (a religious duty) (Taji-Farouki 1994:374-75).

As mentioned, Wiktorowicz has studied Islamist activism in Europe and the Middle East from a rational actor perspective, and he argues that it is of vital importance that we take seriously the ideologies at hand. Concerning al-Muhajiroun, he explains:

“Al-Muhajiroun’s ideology outlines an exclusive strategy to salvation, which entails a number of costly and risky behaviours. Any deviations from this strategy mean that an individual will not enter Paradise, thus eroding tendencies towards free-riding. For those who accepted the movement ideology and sought salvation, a refusal to engage in high-cost/risk activism was tantamount to violating self-interest, because it meant that they would go to Hell” (Wiktorowicz and Kaltenthaler, 2006:296-97).

What is of interest here is that this explanation of motivational factors emphasise religious elements (fear of hell being the more prominent), thus forming a contrast to the argument above that IS rationales are more about politics than religion.

Whose Caliphate?

When IS performs public beheadings of Western hostages these appear to be political rather than religious actions because it demonstrates with all possible clarity that this entity shies away from no means in its struggle to create an alternative state and challenge the existing world order (or dis-order it would seem) and the domination of US foreign politics. Not even fellow Muslims are spared – not individual aid workers, Hizbollah soldiers nor Syrian civilians. In fact, the largest number of victims of IS’ atrocities are Muslims. At the same time, the best explanation for the attraction of individuals to IS seems to be the one taking religious motivation and rationales into account. So, how is one to make sense of this?

What may sound like an easy answer to this very complicated question is likely to be the best one: Political and religious rationales are conflated in an enterprise like IS and which of the two is the dominating one depends on which level of the movement or which activity one studies. Some activities appear to be dominated by political logics, while others appear to be dominated by religion and individual belief.

In terms of the threat of a pending beheading of Peter Kassig, the threat alone and thereby the imagined images provoked in the minds of ordinary human beings on the planet including heads of states constitutes terror and draws on a political logic. By making threats like this, IS is letting the world know that they fear nothing. Interestingly, in order to make such gruesome statements and horrific threats, the individuals making them must be driven by deep, individual convictions best characterised as religious rationales. The executioners in IS must be convinced that by sending what they regard as lesser human beings to hell, they are themselves brought closer to God. In this manner, al-Baghdadi’s Caliphate is not an ideal state for all the world’s Muslims. It is a dream in the minds of some militant and idealistic Islamists fuelled by a combination of political and religious rationales. They may believe they are fighting to create a more just society than what the worlds has seen hitherto, but for

Muslims and non-Muslims not fuelled by this specific ideology, the fairness and beauty is so very hard to see.

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About the author:

Kirstine Sinclair is an Assistant Professor, PhD, at the Centre for Contemporary Middle East Studies, Department of History, University of Southern Denmark.