A new religious state model in the case of "Islamic State"

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“O Muslims, come to your state. Yes, your state! Come! Syria is not for Syrians, and Iraq is not for Iraqis. The earth belongs to God! He bestows it on whom He wills of His servants...” (Abū Bakr al-Baghdādī, 1 July 2014).

Since the beginning of the new millennium, the Middle East region has experienced many changes, which contributed to the regional turmoil in the short and long term. Among the events that affected the region, there are the US invasion in Iraq (2003), the outbreak of the "Arab Spring" (2011), the strengthening of radical Islamic movements, as well as the emergence of a new kind of terrorist groups, like the "Islamic state".

The “Islamic State” has garnered international condemnation for its violence and endless cruelty under ethnic and religious auspices. Their brutal tactics and quick expansion in the Middle East caught the world by surprise. In December 2014, The "New York Times" published a statement of Major General Michael K. Nagata, the Special Operations commander for the United States in the Middle East. “We have not defeated the idea,” he said. “We do not even understand the idea”. Similarly, President Obama has referred to the Islamic State, variously, as “not Islamic” and as al-Qaeda’s “jayvee team”, statements that reflected misunderstanding about this organization (in Wood, 2015).

So, what is the "Islamic State" and what are its real intentions?
The "Islamic state" aims to create an Islamic caliphate which would allow the establishment of religious law and order, under a big commitment to return civilization to a seventh-century environment. This alternative state model will have a new cultural content and new power sources, thus opposing the existing international order, in which a nation-state, with clear boundaries, governance and a monopoly on the use of violence, is still a key actor in the international arena. The "Islamic state" supports the struggle for global jihad against the unbelievers, strives to realize the idea of erasing the borders between Muslim countries, and establishing a wide Islamic caliphate.

In this proposal, I argue that this organization contains intrinsic paradoxes related to the denial of both nationalism and nation-state, though in practice there is a preference for both Islamic religious nationalism and the principles of modern state. Even with the rejection of modernity, secularization, globalization and nationalism, the "Islamic State" supports religious nationalism, and emphasizes the principle of one religion and state building shared by all Muslims. It rejects the modern nationalism, but offers instead similar national aspiration - a self-expression of religious group in the form of an independent state.

Today, there is a recognition that religious nationalism may be a modern and distinctive type of nationalism. Religious nationalism tries to reframe the language of modern politics and provide a new infrastructure to a nation-state. Meanwhile, it criticizes secular politics and culture, and opposes western ideologies and foreign powers. Religious nationalism favors the fight against
Western culture and its political ideology and its cultural symbols, in order to instill new moral values into public life. This is the essence of the "Islamic State" that advocates the principles of religious nationalism.

The "Islamic State" **rejects nationalism** in favor of the utopian ummah of Islam, which in fact is based on unique religious criteria. According to the Declaration of the “Islamic State”, the Islamic ummah will be united (p. 4). An ummah transcends nationalism and does not differentiate between nations, ethnic origins or races, but emphasizes the specific religious criteria (just like religious nationalism). The Declaration proclaims:

"If, by Allah, you do not believe in democracy, secularism, nationalism, and all the other rubbish and ideas from the West and instead adhere to your religion and your creed, then by Allah you will own the earth, and the east and west will submit to you. This is Allah’s promise to you” (p. 6; in Jabareen, 2015: 53).

The main idea of the "Islamic State" is based on religious unity and opposition to existing national states. The "Islamic State" rejects differences based on nationality, ethnicity and race, namely denies ethnic nationalism which emphasizes the political aspirations of national self-determination. At the same time, this organization aims at creating a state based on religious nationalism and a desire to return to the Caliphate and to Islamic rule based on Sharia, with specific traditions of early Islam.

In this context, in the following passage from the declaration of the Caliphate, Abu Bakr claims:
"Lift your heads up high. You now have a state and a caliphate that restores your honor, your might, your rights and your sovereignty. The state forms a tie of brotherhood between Arab and non-Arab, white and black, Easterner and Westerner. The caliphate brings together the Caucasian, Indian, Chinese, Shami, Iraqi, Yemeni, Egyptian, North African, American, French, German and Australian.... There are homes here for you and your families. You can be a major contributor towards the liberation of Makkah, Madinah, and al-Quds. Would you not like to reach Judgment Day with these grand deeds... A life of jihad is impossible until you pack your belongings and move to the caliphate (Schmid, 2015: 3).

The "Islamic State" appeals to Muslims worldwide, calling on them to change the existing order and to rebel against the existing regimes. This is compatible with principles of religious nationalism, like a fight against West and its political ideology, or an installation of new religious infrastructure and moral values. This agenda explains an aggressive hostility towards other religions and ideologies, and a brutal enforcement of public morality and social norms.

The "Islamic state" is based on the use of force in the name of pure Salafi Islam, through justification of violent jihad, intimidation and terror. To give one example: In September 2014, Sheikh Abu Muhammad al-Adnani, the "Islamic State"’s chief spokesman, called on all supporters in Western countries to find an infidel and “smash his head with a rock,” poison him, run him over with a car, or “destroy his crops”. He called on to kill Westerners arbitrarily throughout the world, both civilians and military personnel.
Salafi-jihadist ideology seeks to destroy any another ideology or way of life, and is based on the negation of the "Other". In this way, any deviation from pure Salafi Islam would be considered a deviation from the right path. The moral superiority, in the eyes of the leaders and the supporters of the "Islamic State", justifies the way of this organization, including ethnic cleansing, murders, rapes, slavery and amputation, robbery, theft and total destruction. They are committed to expanding Dar al-Islam (the land of Islam), through the implementation of horrible methods.

This desire of creating a religious state based on religious laws and common religious belief as a basis of collective solidarity, reflects the principles of religious nationalism in the "Islamic State", despite the rejection of the idea of modern Western nationalism.

In addition to rejection of nationalism, the "Islamic State" rejects the model of the modern state. This organization undermines the state frameworks in the Middle East and illustrates the dynamics of frames disintegration. It maintains ambitious objectives of creating new space beyond the familiar boundaries of nation-states.

The "Islamic State" regenerates utopia of the Muslim revival and the Sharia-based caliphate. In November 2014, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi has promised: “O Muslims, be assured, for your state is well and in the best of conditions. Its advance will not cease, and it will continue expanding, God willing, “though the unbelievers be averse”.”

The "Islamic State" offers "home to every believer" in Islam, a state that goes beyond the borders drawn on a map, but is still a state entity, which has an
ideological infrastructure, territory, population, a monopoly on power, security and military services, justice system, utilization of resources, tax collection, etc. All these feature the modern state, and despite the desire of the "Islamic state" to create a new kind of model state and reject the existing model, it reminds patterns of the typical modern nation-state.

This organization desires to introduce religious regime and to build a top-down structure to rule it. Within this framework, similar to the model of the nation-state, there will be a regulation of the economy and society and a management of civilian life based on religious laws and orders. In this country there will be a new socio-political agenda, symbols of belonging, like a flag, hymn or coin, as well as new sources of ethics and justice. This great aspiration of creating a new type of state, actually reflects the characteristics of modern state, despite the absolute rejection of this.

In conclusion, we can see that the key ideas underlying the ideology of "Islamic State" - the establishment and consolidation of the Caliphate in the wider world; the supremacy of Sharia law, the resistance to democracy and secularism, jihad against the infidels – are related conceptually to the development of Islamic religious nationalism, which emphasizes defining collective identity as religious, introducing to the new state new cultural-religious content, as well as new power sources.

The "Islamic state" undermines the existing order in the nation state and tries to create a new state model. As part of its adherence to Islamic religious nationalism, the "Islamic state" aims to spread over new territorial spaces and create a caliphate, which would allow the expansion of Islamic authority and
the establishment of religious laws and pure religious content. But just as a nation-state, the caliphate will rule and control a population in a given territory, enjoy a monopoly over use of force, provide goods and services to citizens - that is to say, fulfill functions similar to a modern nation-state. So, despite the rejection of every aspect of modernity, in fact the "Islamic state" restores the principles of modern state and modern religious nationalism.

References:


