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ISIS: The Taint of Murji'ism and the Curse of Hypocrisy

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Abstract

This paper is an attempt to analyze one facet of ISIS' discourse in order to understand why the movement chooses the arguments it does and how it uses them to achieve particular goals. One of the most commonly occurring tropes in ISIS propaganda is its critique of its opponents as "Murji'ites." The Murji'ites were a school of Islamic thought that emerged early on in the history of the Muslim community, and ideas and claims associated with them were critical in debates over Islamic identity and the path to salvation. In the modern era, various movements have reinterpreted the traditional discourse on the Murji'ites in specific ways, and ISIS spokesmen draw on both classical and modern elaborations of an idea of Murji'ism to polemicize against Muslims who resist their claims and fail to support them. Thus, we see that ISIS does not create its rhetoric out of whole cloth, but borrows pieces from Islamic intellectual tradition selectively and engages with older Salafist ideas in the articulation of a new ideology.

Introduction

There are many tropes threaded throughout the propaganda of the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria.¹ It uses these themes to create a compelling message both to inform the world of its intentions and win recruits to its cause. These themes are usually drawn from traditional Islamic discourse, which serves to plug the group into the greater religious tradition and presents it as having a legitimate religious voice. It also helps the group define and delineate what it considers "Islamic" and what not. One of ISIS' most commonly used tropes is its critique of opponents as

“Murji’ites,” a school of Islamic thought that developed in the early period of the Islamic community and was central in debates concerning Islamic identity and salvation.

ISIS uses the term *murji’at* as a pejorative, though what it means by the label is not always clear. It is often associated with ideas of hypocrisy (*nifāq*), oppression (*ṭaghūt*) and innovation (*bid’ah*). These three concepts create a powerful trinity in ISIS’ view of Islam and the world and are instrumental parts of its use of ideology to create and maintain a state based on its narrow and specific reading of the Islamic intellectual tradition and its identification of what “correct” Islam is.

As we shall see, Murji’ism is a complex topic. Whether one speaks of the mainstream Islamic intellectual tradition or the specific interpretation of ISIS, Murji’ism often reflects contemporary needs for vilification or spurring followers to political action. While Murji’ism began as a response to a specific split within the Islamic community, a response intended as a compromise position to avoid division, it turned just as quickly into a vehicle for political and theological mobilization—in some cases as a rallying cry, but in most as a pejorative heresy.² The latter conception has been the most enduring in history, and turned Murji’ism into a school where many might accept its tenets but few would espouse them outright.

While the development of Murji’ism as a school of thought that no one subscribes to but many degrade is interesting in and of itself, what is significant is how ISIS uses it to create a coherent discourse through which to accomplish recruiting and self-legitimization. In recognizing this, it is important to see how ISIS has adapted the concept from previous movements and bundled it with a group of other highly productive symbols to strengthen its message. This symbolic action is important to recognize, for much of ISIS’ success has emerged not just on the battlefield but by deploying rhetoric backed by a compelling ideology to motivate individuals to migrate and die for its cause.

Breaking down the package of Murji’ism and its associated ideas is important because it shows how ISIS is able not only to use the Islamic intellectual tradition but also to improvise to create compelling arguments. By reconfiguring old ideas, it gains a veneer of conservative legitimacy that Islamic fundamentalists value so highly, while maintaining the power to innovate and create new material from old. By combining arguments that obedience to secular law detracts from following a true Islamic path, that refusing to fight in what it identifies as a legitimate jihad contributes strength to the enemy, and that acting in ways contrary to ISIS’ demands imperils one’s very faith with time-worn arguments about Murji’ism, ISIS can bring its rhetoric to a highly effective level.

In this sense, we should view publications like *Dabiq* and much of ISIS’ media production not just as propaganda but as a coherent discourse that intends to build and implement a worldview among its consumers. While some of its material is intended for the outside, most of it is

unconvincing to anyone who has not already associated themselves with ISIS' ideology. Instead, ISIS' ideology gives potential recruits and sympathizers a vocabulary and perspective on the world which they can use to inform their own actions and to engage with others they might encounter, whether potential sympathizers or opponents who might try to draw the potential militant from their path.

This paper is an attempt to analyze one facet of ISIS' discourse in order to understand why ISIS chooses the arguments it does, how it uses them, and what end it intends to achieve: to recruit members, inform them of ISIS' policies, and encourage them to act in the world, particularly to emigrate to Syria and add their manpower to the greater cause. Consequently, the Murji'ite complex serves as an ideal point of entry into the purpose of ISIS' communications and its goals as a movement.

Unfortunately, the debates surrounding Murji'ism are hard to understand. This difficulty emerges in part because the term is an old one and carries much theological baggage, and in part because ISIS develops their own conception of Murji'ism from within a particular modern context. Consequently, this paper will seek first to explore the historical context, development, and use of Murji'ism within the mainstream Islamic intellectual tradition, and then to explain how ISIS interprets and uses the term for its own ends.

Historical Murji'ism

Murji'ism emerged as a theological school very early in the history of Islamic thought. It played a major role in the early community's debates concerning salvation and who had rightful claim to membership in the community. This debate was particularly cogent within the context of the struggle for caliphal authority between 'Alī b. Abī Ṭālib, the Prophet's nephew and presumptive heir to the previous caliph, and Mu'āwiyah b. Abī Sufyān, the governor of Syria and eventual founder of the Umayyad Caliphate. Their conflict revolved around the question of who was the best political leader and most upright Muslim to lead the community.

While this conflict, generally called the First Fitnah (civil war), is popularly understood as the beginning of the Shi'ah-Sunni divide, what is important for our discussion is the emergence of a third division, the Kharijites, who challenged the community by advocating a strict, exclusivist definition of Islam and membership in its community. They considered only the truly righteous as worthy of being called Muslims, a proposition that at the time was interpreted to exclude not just 'Alī and Mu'āwiyah, but also a large segment of the then-current Islamic establishment and community as a whole—a rupture that seriously threatened the unity of the Islamic community.

In the political context of the early community, debate over caliphal legitimacy specifically—and membership in the Islamic community as well—was particularly contentious because it dictated

whether one should take up arms against the ruler or not. While the loyalist position held that the Umayyad caliph was not only a legitimate ruler, but also best qualified religiously to guide the community, the extremist opinion, most commonly associated with Kharijism, not only refused to acknowledge the legitimacy of the Umayyad Caliphate, but also advocated armed rebellion against them. Consequently, while moderates might live with either ruling party, the extremes were dedicated to fighting a bloody and divisive conflict that threatened to end Islamic political hegemony and its empire shortly after it had begun.³

According to the accounts of later authors, Murji'ism developed initially as a compromise in response to the schismatic threat that Umayyad loyalism and Kharijism posed, a compromise that would ensure the social and political stability of the whole by creating a definition of Islam that would result in broad inclusivity.⁴ It centered on an ethos of political quietism.⁵ Its center piece was the concept of *irjā'*, meaning "deferral." Deferral in this case meant the belief that a judgment of another believer's faith cannot be made in the current world but is postponed to the final judgment when God would decide among the worthy.⁶ This countered Kharijite extremism in both its political claims (i.e., that the Umayyads should be overthrown) and its personal attacks against individual Muslims whom they viewed as deviating from the faith.⁷

In the specific case of the debate between Mu'āwiyah and 'Alī, deferral meant that the question of who was more eligible to lead the community should be deferred indefinitely, making rebellion an invidious and harmful action even if one viewed either or both of them as illegitimate Muslims. In general terms, it meant the community could be led by anyone who met certain criteria, not merely the most just or the most righteous.⁸

While the idea of deferral was initially the core of the school's ideas, as reflected in one of its earliest expositions in a letter reproduced and discussed by Josef van Ess called the *Kitāb al-Irjā'*, Murji'ism later became even more strongly associated with a different idea, the separation of deeds from faith.⁹ This doctrine, which was often the basis of attacks on the Murji'ites by their opponents, held that Murji'ism improperly separated *islām* (submission, but understood to entail specific actions) from *imān* (faith).¹⁰ This was problematic because Murji'ites (supposedly) believed in deferring judgment to God to such a degree that individuals who committed grave sins that clearly put them outside the pale of Islam, such as apostasy or slander of the Prophet—sins that the Qur'ān itself declares to nullify faith—would remain within the community and still be considered legitimate Muslims, benefitting (both spiritually and materially) from such membership. In essence, critics argued that clear absurdities, injustice, and potential violations of scripture resulted from the Murji'ite position.¹¹

In its extreme, these opponents opine, Murji'ism would even allow one to make the illicit licit (*istiḥlāl*) or vice versa, considered to be a grave sin as by doing so, one controverted and abrogated the holy text using one's own reason, replacing God's will with one's own willfulness.

Indeed, as time went on, Murji'ism became less and less associated with the concept of *irjā'*, despite providing the name of the group, and gained fame in heresiographies for its potential to condone the illicit as licit.¹²

In the narratives passed down to us, the claim that the Murji'ites sought to separate deeds from faith developed as a result of Murji'ism's deployment to rally political action in a later cause, which moved the philosophy from the realm of quietism into sometimes violent activism, with uprisings happening in Khurāsān, in the eastern part of modern-day Iran.¹³ During the Umayyad Caliphate, after the First Fitnah, strife emerged between Arab Muslims who participated in the initial invasions and converts who embraced the faith after their lands had been conquered. Converts had many reasons for joining the new faith, aside from personal conviction, and Arabs had many reasons to deny them membership in the community.

Materially, non-Muslims had the burden of two sets of taxes to pay: the *jizyah*, a poll-tax levelled on all non-Muslim inhabitants of the land, and the *kharāj*, a tax that non-Muslim farmers had to pay on the land they cultivated. Becoming a Muslim meant simultaneously that converts were relieved of the burden of these taxes and that the community at large, which pooled together and paid out the income from these taxes to its membership in the form of stipends, lost revenue. In other words, conversion shifted the tax burden from local residents to Arab armies and settlers. In part because of this, there was a reluctance to admit converts as full-fledged members of the community. This created resentment among many inhabitants of the empire, particularly in remoter areas where there were larger numbers of converts and fewer Arabs.¹⁴

In this case, Murji'ism allowed community membership based simply on the declaration of faith, not on actions or identity at birth. One merely needed to profess the faith by reciting the *shahādah* and one gained both membership in the community and the alleviation of a significant tax burden. This new understanding of faith became instrumental in several provincial uprisings, in which Murji'ism seems to have coalesced as a more formal school of thought than it had been previously, becoming a vehicle for political action.

This new use of Murji'ism placed it in the center of political and religious debates, however. What had previously been a quietist position now became a lightning rod as individuals within the community took positions for or against it, depending on their own interests and feelings regarding not just theology but also social and political concerns. As a result of this transformation, Murji'ism earned a place of infamy in the realm of heresies. While the converts won their battles and became an indelible part of the larger community, those who embraced Murji'ism erred, so the new heresiographers argued, by pushing inclusion too far.¹⁵

It is likely that the development of Murji'ism into an activist creed that separates deeds from faith occurred at a later date.¹⁶ This position is neither directly stated nor implied in the founding work

of the movement, the aforementioned *Kitāb al-Irjā'* by Al-Ḥasan ibn Muḥammad Ibn al-Ḥanafīyyah (d. 700), a work that was itself written after the initial conflict over leadership that gave birth to Kharijism. It is significant, however, that at some point the two concepts of deferral and separation were themselves separated; while the latter came to be wholly identified with Murji'ism and condemned, the former, the principle of *irjā'*, was accepted by many schools of Islamic thought.

It is interesting in this respect to examine the most famous name associated with Murji'ism, the jurist Abū Ḥanīfah (d. 767). Abū Ḥanīfah's inclination toward certain Murji'ite positions is recognized by many scholars; the most significant presentation of Abū Ḥanīfah's Murji'ism in Western scholarship is Joseph Schacht's analysis of the scholar's treatise on the subject called *Kitāb al-Ālim wa'l-Muta'allim*.¹⁷ What is notable about this treatise is that it does not portray Abū Ḥanīfah as unambiguously Murji'ite. Instead, he supports the concept of *irjā'* against its opponents while condemning the Murji'ites as a group for their separation of deeds from faith.¹⁸

That Abū Ḥanīfah makes this distinction is significant, not just because it shows the general adoption of a popularized concept of *irjā'*, but also because it shows that Murji'ism had crystallized into a heretical epithet at an early date; while Abū Ḥanīfah accepts the basic idea of *irjā'*, he rejects Murji'ism itself as a creed. It also raises the question of who exactly espoused the extremist views with which Murji'ism is associated. It is clear that the doctrine of *irjā'* found adherents, especially among rebellious converts in Khurāsān.¹⁹ However, it is less clear that there was ever a strong party of Murji'ites that accepted unequivocally the doctrine of separating deeds from faith, which makes separating the actual history of the doctrine from its later interpretation extremely difficult.²⁰ Unfortunately for the school, despite the general adoption of its primary tenet, later thinkers continued to relegate it to the realm of heresy.²¹

If it is true that this second component of Murji'ism was little if at all actually adhered to by real believers, then it indicates the role which Murji'ism as a trope has played in the rhetoric of Islamic factionalism. It shows that the claim of Murji'ism has historically been a powerful accusation that became untethered from any specific social context, making it deployable against opponents who generally fit its mold.²² This demonstrates the continuity between the past and ISIS' Jihadi-Salafist present, for Murji'ism has been resurrected in recent years as a productive tool for categorizing and delegitimizing many of the opponents of Salafism within the Islamic community.²³

While we observe the continuity of ISIS' use of Murji'ism within the Islamic tradition, we should note that ISIS and its contemporaries are not slaves to that intellectual tradition. Indeed, observers have noted that while they are active consumers of the Islamic intellectual past, they also reinterpret that tradition to support their positions.²⁴ Their use of Murji'ism is no exception. Consequently, before we analyze ISIS' propaganda statements against Murji'ism, we should

understand what ISIS and other Jihadist-Salafists mean by the term and how they use this label in conjunction with a series of other topoi to build categories of approbation and stigmatize groups that oppose or rival them.

Renewed accusations of Murji'ism

Our discussion of the historical development of Murji'ism began and ended very early in Islamic history. This is because Murji'ism formed a key part of debates pertaining to Islamic theology and the identity of those who deserved to be recognized as fellow believers. Such theological questions, including questions about the nature of God and the Qur'ān, were settled fairly early in Islamic history, and as debates about theology waned, intellectuals turned their attention to other subjects.²⁵ The intellectual disciplines that gained prominence as theology lost it included law, philosophy, mysticism, and the coalescing distinctions between Sunnism and Shi'ism. Indeed, it is in this new intellectual world that we see the emergence of the four legal schools, the much debated “closing” of the gates of *ijtihād*, the development of the schools of modern Sufism, and the writings of the great philosophers. It is not until the eighteenth century that we see a resurgence of debates surrounding theology and basic doctrinal questions such as who deserves to be considered a member of the Islamic community.

The re-emergence of theological issues in the Islamic world was sparked by two simultaneous historical events. The first was a revival movement in the Arabian Peninsula spearheaded by the political expansion of the Ibn Sa'ūd family and supported by the followers of Muḥammad b. 'Abd al-Wahhāb (d. 1792), a fundamentalist scholar who preached an extreme doctrine that condemned all forms of Islam deviating from his strict, literalist interpretation of it. He declared that these “alternative” practices of Islam violated *tawḥīd*, or the unity of God, and thereby fell into *shirk*, or polytheism. His ire was raised especially by Sufi groups and worship at saints' shrines. The second event was the contemporary emergence of an era of colonialism that brought a package of Western cultural traits often referred to as “modernity” to bear against local folkways and the dominant Islamic intellectual tradition.

Modernity posed a particular challenge to the Islamic intellectual tradition in that, while it was highly sophisticated and cosmopolitan, it had long been accustomed to assimilating other traditions on its own terms. With the loss of political dominance caused by the intrusion of Europeans, Muslim scholars were forced to reconcile with newly dominant foreign traditions. As the influence of Europeans increased, a crisis emerged.

There were two general responses to the crisis that modernity presented in the Islamic world.²⁶ One was pioneered in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries by thinkers like Sayyid Jamāl al-Dīn al-Afghānī (d. 1897) and Muḥammad 'Abduh (d. 1905), who suggested an integration of Western sciences with Islam, with one informing the other to create a synthesis

between them. This required rethinking many basic assumptions in the Islamic tradition, including law, mysticism, and, to a lesser extent, theology. This approach, which is followed by the majority of Muslims today, envisioned an Islamic modernity in which Islam would stand alongside Christianity as a religion of, to use a favorite term of the nineteenth century, “progress.”

In the second response, counter-narratives to the European incursion were formed. These approaches emphasized rejecting modern interpretations of the world and religion as iniquitous and un-Islamic. In this sense, their followers can be described as “fundamentalists.” In this worldview, certain aspects of modern technology and social thought might be incorporated into Islamic society but only if strictly subordinated to Islam. This counter-movement often went further than just demanding a struggle against the Western import of modernity, however; it demanded total reform of the Islamic tradition at hand, following in the footsteps of Wahhabism and related movements.²⁷ It also, in many cases, viewed local interpretations of Islam, such as worship at saints’ shrines, as foreign to a religion that should be solely inspired by its sacred text and original traditions.²⁸ Because of these concerns, the fundamentalists felt it was time to clean the slate and re-examine the basic questions of Islam, such as who was and was not a Muslim and what was and was not Islamic. This necessitated a revival of the basic traditions of theology. The fundamentalists who were most heavily involved in this re-evaluation and who believed that the only the Qur’ān and the *sunnah* of the Prophet (his sayings and behavior) could resolve religious issues came to be known as Salafists.

Thinkers of a Salafist orientation adopted different approaches to the perceived need to re-evaluate Islamic thought. One was followed by individuals such as Sayyid Qutb (d. 1962), who considered classical Islamic scholarship as a whole to be useful but unnecessary. Instead, he sought to read the Qur’ān and *sunnah* with new eyes, ironically becoming innovative in his own way. The second group, the tradition to which ISIS and its ideologues belong, viewed the classical scholarship as a bedrock foundation but disagreed with the way in which that scholarship had been used, especially regarding the creation of what they considered illegitimate divisions within the community, such as the legal schools, as well as innovations such as the introduction of Greek philosophy and other non-Islamic forms of knowledge into Islamic thought. This led to a selective and particular interpretation of the tradition.

As time went on, another group of Salafists revived arguments about Murji’ism to bolster positions against the various semi- or wholly secular regimes of the Arab world. In targeting Muslim governments, these Salafists differ from other fundamentalists like Bin Laden who focused their attacks on the “far enemy” of the West.²⁹ This reorientation created a problem, however, for the regimes these Salafists targeted are nominally Muslim, and a tenet of Islam, historically observed perhaps more often in the breach, prohibits Muslims from fighting among themselves. Consequently, in order for those Salafists who urged violent attacks against regimes in the Middle East to justify their call to action, they needed a way to demonstrate that the governments

currently administering Islamic countries are not themselves Islamic, nor their rulers truly Muslim.³⁰

In order to accomplish this, the two schools of Salafism, those like Qutb who reinterpreted the texts freely and those who more readily turned to and made use of older traditions (albeit selectively), joined forces. Qutb's idea that the then-current state of affairs in the Arab-Islamic world represented a return to the Jāhiliyyah, or the period of "ignorance" that predated the emergence of Islam, combined with *takfir*, the labeling of an opponent as an infidel, provided useful arguments to convince the Salafists' followers that secular regimes were in fact apostates.³¹

These arguments did not work on everybody, however. The willingness of many Salafists to take such an extreme step as to discount the profession of faith made by public persons set off a battle within organizations aimed at Islamic reform, groups like the Muslim Brotherhood, which were often dominated by moderates who were unwilling to take the step of recognizing political rulers as outside the pale of Islam and thereby potentially legitimizing violence against them.³²

The split between the moderate and the extreme Islamic opposition presented the radical Salafist party with a rhetorical problem similar to that of critiquing Muslim regimes despite the taboo on fomenting *fitnah*. In this case, rather than resorting to the reasoning of contemporary thinkers such as Qutb, these partisans reached back into the classical period of Islamic thought, painting their opponents as Murji'ites for refusing to condemn world leaders as apostates and thereby preventing a full Islamic movement against them.³³

While this trend emerged most markedly in debates within the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood during the 1960s and '70s, it eventually influenced Saudi Salafist thought generally and spread into other parts of the radical thoughtworld. In Saudi Arabia such rhetoric was particularly intense given the Islamic nature of the monarchy, which has claimed a wholly Islamic basis for its laws and appointed jurists to support its position. Many groups within the kingdom objected to this stance, however, and pointed to the foreign origin of some statutes, presenting a serious problem to the regime's legitimacy. Ultimately, the biggest security threat came with the attacks on the holy cities of Mecca and Medina in 1979, an act committed by a radical Salafist that galvanized opponents of the regime within the kingdom.³⁴

In the interim, many events, including the war against the Soviets in Afghanistan and the attacks by Al-Qā'idah against Western targets, captured the imagination of Islamic radicals and put a temporary halt to their activities within their own borders. This was only a temporary respite, however: as soon as the Afghan war ended and American intervention in the Middle East opened the door to political instability in Iraq and elsewhere, Salafist activity against local regimes increased. This required these radical groups to both justify their attacks to their fellow citizens

and to convince bystanders of why they should believe their neighbors to be apostates living un-Islamic lives.

Individuals who attempt to encourage militant action within their own states have had convenient recourse to the idea of Murji'ism. In recent years, perhaps its greatest exponent has been the Jordanian thinker Abū Muḥammad al-Maḡdisī, a radical Jihadi-Salafist who influenced ISIS through his role as an author of radical literature, though he himself has come to oppose ISIS. He was also the one-time spiritual mentor for Abū Muṣ'ab al-Zarqawī (d. 2006), the founder of the Al-Qā'idah branch in Iraq that would eventually evolve into the Islamic State. Maḡdisī himself came by the use of the term "Murji'ite" and much of his knowledge through his connections with the Afghan Arab movement as well as from time spent studying in Saudi Arabia. Maḡdisī's near-constant time in prison after returning to Jordan gave him the opportunity to spread his message and view of Islam there, including how to use the term and who should be considered a Murji'ite.

These parties use the term "Murji'ism" to provide the ideological inspiration to violent action described above. In this sense, Murji'ism is paired with its classical opposing heresy, Kharijism, to categorize groups and individuals accordingly as they are perceived to employ *takfir* either too little or too often.³⁵ Those individuals who are either working within the system or who are quietist, advocating a suspension of judgment against secular rulers or peaceful resistance to them, are labeled as Murji'ites, while other groups who are perceived as being too narrow-minded in their activities (especially if that group opposes and uses *takfir* against one's own) is viewed as being Kharijite, condemning the righteous Muslim as being unrighteous.³⁶ ISIS has repeatedly done this in its propaganda.³⁷

These classical terms provide a framework for discussion, one that ISIS uses to identify which groups are associated with them and which are opposed to them. By identifying and exploring the reasons for such associations, ISIS is able to identify behaviors which it variously condones or condemns, isolating its opponents from political support, while marshalling support for their own cause. While this paper does not cover ISIS' use of Kharijism as an accusation—an accusation which ISIS itself often bears—this seems to occur less frequently and with less vigor than the accusation of Murji'ism. On the whole, understanding the latter term's use by ISIS and what ISIS means when it refers to an opponent as a Murji'ite is significant for understanding who it perceives as its allies and enemies, how it mobilizes support for or against them, and what kind of world ISIS intends to create.

ISIS' interpretation of Murji'ism

Murji'ism, as ISIS understands it, is primarily concerned with separating deeds from faith and affirming that any Muslim, no matter how iniquitous in action, is counted as part of the community.³⁸ ISIS uses Murji'ism as an opprobrium, and by condemning other Muslims as

Murji'ites, ISIS implicates them in hypocrisy by arguing that because Murji'ites hold that deeds are separate from faith, then such people claim that a person can commit iniquitous deeds and still called a Muslim. As a result, Murji'ites call un-Islamic deeds Islamic. ISIS takes this argument further by supposing that all Muslims living in non-Islamic contexts are *ipso facto* Murji'ites and hypocrites.³⁹

There is a link missing in this argument: it is not clear that just because a Muslim lives in a non-Islamic society, that individual must engage in or endorse non-Islamic behavior. This logical flaw is, in fact, a point Maqdisi and other Salafists opposed to ISIS recognize and the reason some of them label either all of ISIS or parts of ISIS as Kharijites or worse than Kharijites.⁴⁰ As we shall see, however, ISIS explicitly identifies an individual with their society, a fact that has powerful consequences for motivating action, and thus plays an important role in ISIS' propaganda.

Identifying a person with their social context is central to ISIS' use of Murji'ism to create a complex that defines and links together the ideas of innovation, hypocrisy/apostasy, and *ṭāghūt*, or "oppression." Together these terms are part of the main driving force for ISIS' propaganda machine and form the compass rose of ISIS' view of contemporary political structures.

While these terms are important within ISIS' understanding of the world, the organization left them largely undefined explicitly until *Dabiq* 8, in which it devoted an entire section to Murji'ism and its "taint" entitled "Iṛjā': The Most Dangerous Bida'." In this article, ISIS describes what it understands Murji'ism to be and discusses why it is a heresy, citing several scholars to support their opinion.⁴¹ The author begins his discussion of Murji'ism by explaining the idea of *irjā'*, but it is an explanation specific to the Salafist context. They identify *irjā'* as a reaction against the excesses of Kharijism and understand Murji'ism as a deviation that went too far the other way. In doing so, he claims that the Murji'ites "created their own sect."⁴² This is an important accusation, for ISIS believes that true Islam is one wholly without sects, even without the traditional four schools of jurisprudence, so that any creation of sectarianism renders one's Islam void.⁴³

They also define *irjā'* itself, though ISIS' definition requires some interpretation. In *Dabiq* 8 they say that "they [the Murji'ites] expelled action from the reality of Īmān [faith] thereby 'delaying' action beyond Īmān's definition, and this is the linguistic root for the word Iṛjā', as Iṛjā' means 'a delay.'"⁴⁴ This is a somewhat cryptic definition of *irjā'* and it is not clear what ISIS understands is or has been delayed. Is the action (or the judgment of the action, which was the original understanding of *irjā'*) delayed, or does "delay" refer to removing action from "Īmān's definition." Either is possible.

That ISIS uses "delay" to imply the removal of action from faith is supported by much of the rest of the article, which focuses on the Murji'ite belief that action has no bearing on faith. ISIS cites numerous scholars who make this argument, each condemning Murji'ism to varying degrees.⁴⁵

What is significant is that these condemnations take on a straw man quality. None of them asks the question of whether someone who maintains Murji'ism but acts righteously is considered to have valid faith. Instead, ISIS assumes that a Murji'ite is not practicing their faith, and not just on account of small oversights, but rather by committing such grave errors as never fasting and even praying in the opposite direction of the *qiblah*. Further, ISIS sees a Muslim's tolerance of these acts as being just as severe as committing the violations themselves.⁴⁶

While the construction of this straw man is unsurprising given how heresies have been used in the history of Islamic rhetoric, it does accomplish a number of things. First, it allows ISIS to demonstrate clearly that Murji'ism is a heresy that places one outside the pale of Islam. Second, by identifying it as a sect, they can connect it to charges of *bid'ah*. Third, by redefining *irjā'* and emphasizing the aspect of belief in the separation of deeds from faith—and then pushing it still further to say that Murji'ites *necessarily* exclude deeds from faith—ISIS can begin to construct an elaborate definition of hypocrisy, which it then uses to paint large numbers of groups both as Murji'ites and hypocrites.

At the end of the article in *Dabiq* 8, ISIS goes further in adapting the idea of *irjā'* by arguing that there are different forms of it infecting the “battleground of Shām,” a fact that goes a long way to legitimizing or delegitimizing parties in the larger conflict. ISIS defines Syria's *irjā'* as being “Islamic factions’ with a nationalist agenda” and “[n]ationalist factions with an ‘Islamic’ agenda.”⁴⁷ These two categories include all groups supported by outside regimes or aligned with non-ISIS ideologies and encompasses both small groups and larger forces such as the Free Syrian Army.⁴⁸

While these groups often have very different goals, what they do share in common is opposition to ISIS and its brand of transnational Islamic hegemony. They also enjoy support from Arab regimes, the very regimes ISIS opposes and that have been the targets of criticism from other Jihadi-Salafists. In accordance with ISIS' intellectual heritage, it seems to be precisely this connection to the mainstream Islamic world that gives these groups the taint of Murji'ism, a fact confirmed in one of ISIS' first public uses of the label “Murji'ite” in Abū Bakr al-Baghdādī's speech announcing the caliphate, “This is the Promise of Allah.”⁴⁹

The result of this taint, and its sure sign, was these groups' “hypocrisy” in taking territory and then refusing to implement “shari'ah,” which when used by ISIS means the narrow interpretation of shari'ah that ISIS itself supports.⁵⁰ At the end of the article, the author does finally allude to a more classical idea of *irjā'* (i.e., the denial of a connection between actions and faith, rather than that of supporting what it perceives to be pseudo-Islamic regimes) by saying that these groups did not implement the shari'ah because their own fighters are not good Muslims.⁵¹

The Murji'ite bundle, 1: Innovation

This section introduces our exploration of the Murji'ite bundle. The term “bundle” appears here because of the multifaceted nature of ISIS’ use of the idea of Murji’ism. When ISIS refers to Murji’ism, as they make clear throughout the article “I’ra’: The Most Dangerous Bid’a,” they mean more than just Murji’ism itself. In ISIS’ propaganda, they tightly connect Murji’ism with the ideas of innovation, hypocrisy, and oppression to create a powerful means of accusing its opponents of multiple sins in a single instant. As a result, to understand the importance of ISIS’ rhetorical use of Murji’ism fully, we must break down the bundle ISIS has created and examine its parts.

Innovation (*bid’ah*) is a term with a long history in the Islamic intellectual tradition. Originally, it referred in a general way to any practice that came after the time of the Prophet and his Companions, and as such had two modalities: *bid’ah ḥasanah* and *bid’ah al-madhmūmah*. The first class of innovations were good; these included practices that can even be considered individual obligations, such as the study of grammar or rhetoric. The second class includes innovations that run contrary to the principles outlined in the four sources of law: the Qur’ān, the *sunnah*, the consensus of scholars, and the use of reason or analogy.⁵²

While the above represents a traditional view of *bid’ah*, there has always been a strong minority condemning any innovation as heterodox and unauthorized. While such an extreme position has historically been marginal, such condemnation has become increasingly commonplace in fundamentalist rhetoric with the rise of Salafism and its conscious ahistorical claim of returning to what these groups perceive as the unmediated practice of the Prophet. Because any innovation by definition was absent from the Prophet’s original community in Medina, any innovation is by definition forbidden, no matter how beneficial its character. The accusation of innovation is, for example, common in the works of Sayyid Qutb, occurring in both *In the Shade of the Qur’ān*, his exegesis of the holy text, and *Milestones*. Osama Bin Laden also employed the term as a criticism of Arab regimes that adopted pro-Western stances and thus, in his view, compromised the faith.⁵³ It is also characteristic of Bin Laden’s own intellectual heritage, standing as a cornerstone of Ibn ‘Abd al-Wahhāb’s original reformation movement.⁵⁴

It is not coincidence, therefore, that one of ISIS’ major complaints about those it calls Murji’ites concerns their perceived innovation within the Islamic intellectual tradition.⁵⁵ Because Murji’ism falls outside of the original intentions of the Qur’ān as ISIS understands it, it is automatically suspect as *bid’ah*. In this way, ISIS’ condemnation of Murji’ism parallels the similar condemnation of the Shi’ah. Many groups, such as Al-Qā’idah, condemn the Shi’ah as *ahl al-bid’ah* (people of innovation), referring primarily to what is perceived as an innovation in the Shi’i theological elaboration of the role of the Imams in religion.⁵⁶ Piggy-backing on this rhetorical tradition, ISIS is able to condemn multiple parties under the same accusation: the Shi’ah are guilty of innovation

through avowal of the Imamate, while Murji'ites are guilty of innovation by reinterpreting their legal obligations, but doing so while still claiming to be within the "orthodox" Sunni tradition.⁵⁷

We see here that *bid'ah* is a very basic and powerful charge. ISIS can potentially call anything it disagrees with an innovation, and by doing so portrays itself as the only true inheritor of the Islamic tradition as established and practiced by the Prophet. Moreover, because ISIS believes it has the only true view of Islam, ISIS assumes it must know what was originally intended to be part of the faith, both what it permits and what it excludes, legitimizing its authority to label phenomena as innovative or not. It follows then that anything falling outside of its understanding of Islam must be, *ipso facto*, an innovation.⁵⁸

On the surface, the ubiquitous rhetorical possibility of *bid'ah* seems to take some of the sting out of its accusation, for anyone other than ISIS is ripe for condemnation on its account. It is significant that while ISIS often implies as much, it reserves its special critique of *bid'ah* for particular groups. In the case of Murji'ism, ISIS not only condemns it as *bid'ah* but actually writes in the subtitle of its article on *irjā'* that it is the "most dangerous" innovation.⁵⁹ In doing so, it singles out this theological tendency as deserving special condemnation and makes it clear that when ISIS refers to specific groups as Murji'ites, it also considers them innovators. Murji'ism is such a dangerous innovation because of its connection to hypocrisy, a sin that puts into question a Muslim's very belonging to the community.⁶⁰

The Murji'ite bundle, 2: Hypocrisy

Perhaps the most significant element of ISIS' Murji'ite bundle is hypocrisy. Like the concept of Murji'ism itself, ISIS uses this term both in its classical sense and in a more particular way that links ISIS with a broader spectrum of Jihadi-Salafist thought, while simultaneously taking the idea farther than previously realized due to its declaration of the Caliphate. Its adaptations specifically serve to effect its recruitment and ideological goals. Both definitions are covered in the article on Murji'ism cited often here, "Irjā': The Most Dangerous Bid'a" from *Dabiq* 8, though its more particular use of the term is more prevalent throughout *Dabiq* and in ISIS speeches generally.

In general, but in this article especially, Murji'ism is strongly linked to hypocrisy. This link emerges for complex reasons. First, ISIS relies on the traditional claim that Murji'ism removes deeds from faith, meaning that a Murji'i can represent any act, in theory, as being Islamic even if the act is repugnant to the faith. This leads, in their novel interpretation, to the assertion that all Muslims who refuse to affiliate with ISIS or actively oppose them are essentially Murji'ites, and thus hypocrites.

The reader should bear in mind that ISIS' world is one of philosophical extremes and dichotomies. Consequently, if one can do something, one will do it to the extreme of either virtue

or vice. As a result, ISIS assumes that a Murji'ite will necessarily commit grave errors on account of his or her Murji'ism.⁶¹ The discrepancy between action and belief is a hallmark of the classical Islamic understanding of hypocrisy, though in this case it is inverted. The classical example of the hypocrites emerged from Muḥammad's community in Medina where they represented old elites who were jealous of Muḥammad's new status and were outwardly righteous Muslims while inwardly scheming to maintain their authority. Consequently, they failed to support the Prophet at crucial moments, especially in battle. The result was something that resembles what we in English typically label as hypocrisy, meaning individuals who pretend to do one thing while in their inmost hearts will another. ISIS does acknowledge this form of hypocrisy and uses it to condemn certain actors.⁶² However, its more powerful and significant model of hypocrisy involves accusing individuals of inwardly believing they are Muslim while outwardly acting in a non-Islamic (at least as understood by ISIS) manner, reversing the traditional understanding of hypocrisy.⁶³

This new model of hypocrisy is particularly useful for ISIS. The conventional definition relied on the discrepancy between outward righteousness and inward belief, which is hard to establish concretely since inner belief is not observable. ISIS' understanding of hypocrisy, on the other hand, is as something both observable and readily condemnable. The explicability of their model also explains why ISIS is so concerned to define and refute hypocrites: in doing so, ISIS can to claim that all Muslims not affiliated with them are hypocrites at best based on what they do or fail to do, especially failing to support ISIS militarily. This support (or the lack of it) is empirically provable in the world.

In order to understand why ISIS is interested in interpreting hypocrisy this way, we must look beyond its extended discussion of Murji'ism in *Dabiq* 8 and examine earlier discussions, such as that in an article found in *Dabiq* 7, "The Extinction of the Grayzone."⁶⁴ The idea of a disappearing "grayzone" is important in ISIS' propaganda and draws on a number of Islamic tropes, reinterpreted in a particular fashion. The first is the idea that the world is necessarily drawn into two camps: believers and unbelievers. In the time before ISIS when there was no caliphate, ISIS argues, who belonged to which camp was unclear. While some, like Bin Laden, were clearly in the camp of the believers and others, such as Christian Euro-American soldiers in Iraq and Afghanistan, were clearly nonbelievers, there were many in the middle, such as ordinary Muslims. These were the true inhabitants of ISIS' grayzone: potential believers who had not yet picked a side.⁶⁵

According to ISIS' understanding of history and the course that history will take, its creation of a caliphate represents an epochal moment that caused the "extinction of the grayzone." Before its existence, Muslims could choose an intermediate space while clinging to a modicum of righteousness because there was nowhere to go where one could truly be Muslim both outwardly and inwardly. With the creation of the Islamic State, however, this changed. Because ISIS supposedly represents the true caliphate, Muslims are required to emigrate to support it,

especially by lending it aid against its foes. As a result of this necessity, the grayzone is shrinking; those who can immigrate to the territory of the Islamic State do so (as they must), while those who do not choose apostasy and damnation by remaining behind.⁶⁶

We also note that Murji'ism and the grayzone are linked. The grayzone for ISIS is defined by its hypocrisy as it is the proper domain of hypocrites. People who claim (and may inwardly believe) they are Muslim but do not act their Islam out live in the grayzone.⁶⁷ What this functionally means is that any individual who prays, fasts, and acts according to an understanding of Islamic law that differs from that of ISIS is a *de facto* hypocrite unless they make an effort to be otherwise. These people are the Murji'ites: they claim to be believers but do not fight the holy war like believers.⁶⁸

This point is important for ISIS' recruiters. The various authors of *Dabiq* and spokespeople for the Caliphate argue in many places that because the non-Islamic world is so non-Islamic, any individual who lives in it becomes an apostate themselves regardless of their intention.⁶⁹ This is because the very environment is imbued with what ISIS perceives not just as non-Islamic but anti-Islamic behavior.⁷⁰ As a result of having to be on the street with immodestly dressed women (this includes even women wearing *hijāb* but not the more substantial *niqāb*), shopping in a store that accepts credit cards, or any range of things, a Muslim becomes a hypocrite involuntarily by accepting these facts and not fighting against them. Because of inaction, this individual fails in their central responsibility to "command the good and forbid the evil." In doing so, they accept the prohibited as if it were permissible and turn Islam on its very head. The only way to avoid this, ISIS very clearly argues, is to emigrate to a location that strictly enforces shari'ah law. Of course, the only place they can do this is in ISIS-controlled territory, making an argument that seeks to feed their migration machine.⁷¹

Understanding ISIS' argument about this kind of unconscious hypocrisy is important not just because in doing so we understand their recruitment strategy, but also because it shows us something about how ISIS uses the Islamic intellectual tradition. The fact that they are adept at not only using the traditional understanding of hypocrisy, but creating a new definition based on it and incorporating that into their discourse demonstrates ISIS spokesmen's command of the Islamic intellectual tradition and the power they can derive from it.

Dabiq engages in a critique of hypocrisy that is much more traditional as well. While the use of hypocrisy we have just discussed intends to force recruits to take a side and to reinforce ISIS' dichotomies, their use of the more conventional model of hypocrisy has a very different goal: to critique and expose the illegitimacy of Arab regimes. ISIS engages in its closest discussion of this form of hypocrisy in *Dabiq* 8, in the same article in which it attacks Murji'ism. Particularly singled out in this section are "palace scholars": these are individuals linked to Arab governments who claim to produce Islamic legal rulings and knowledge that support their governments' policies and ambitions.⁷² As far as ISIS is concerned, Arab nations are especially guilty of hypocrisy because

they claim that enforcing shari'ah is important, and they actually have the power to do so, yet they in fact fail to do so.⁷³

We must examine here precisely what is meant by failing to enforce shari'ah, for many of these countries, Saudi Arabia especially, view themselves as doing just that. A major element of ISIS' understanding of shari'ah is not just enforcing the so-called *ḥadd* penalties, or those punishments which are specified in the Qur'ān, but also an obligation to fight a holy war against all non-Muslims until the world is divided into two camps and righteousness prevails (and possibly Armageddon occurs). This is an uncompromising stance that would require countries like Saudi Arabia to repudiate fully and completely any involvement with Western countries; this is clearly an impossible extreme, though this demand links ISIS to other Jihadi-Salafists who have come before them.

This condemnation of hypocrisy is much more in line with the classical understanding, according to which individuals claim to observe the law but fail in practice. It is also identical to the major accusation of hypocrisy levelled against the hypocrites of Medina by Muḥammad and his community. Not just "palace scholars" but also quietist scholars are guilty of this passivity, for while the latter condemn Muslim regimes for supporting non-Muslim attacks against Muslims, they do nothing to stop it, implying that they prefer comfort to righteousness.

This form of hypocrisy is very different than the first and is used in different ways, for it is a conscious hypocrisy. The point of these accusations, unlike the former, is not to spur immigration to ISIS' Caliphate; none of these accusations appear in contexts linked to the concept of *hijrah*, or migration. Instead, they are clear condemnations: a way of indicating who is with and against whom. They are also significant because they allow ISIS to link in the third element of the Murji'ite bundle: the claim of oppression (*ṭaghūt*).

The Murji'ite bundle, 3: Oppression

Oppression links to hypocrisy and innovation because oppression of a believer occurs when an unrighteous power forces the faithful individual to live and act in an environment built on non-Islamic laws that causes a lapse in religious social responsibility (i.e., a failure to command the good and forbid the evil), creating a non-Islamic, innovative environment. Moreover, a consequence of Murji'ite compromises is that individuals are forced into a position where they are called to obey the innovative, secular laws that operate outside the realm of religion and compelled to internalize their personal religious convictions, even potentially acting against them. This creates a *de facto* separation between deeds and faith that turns the true believer into a hypocrite.

ISIS presents a strong narrative regarding the “oppressor” (*ṭaghūt*). This is a particularly potent word within the Salafist community at large. The term comes from the Qur’ān where it is used eight times, all with a satanic or evil connotation. Specifically, *ṭaghūt* is variously used to mean an idol (Q 2:256, 4:51, 5:60, 39:17), false leaders (Q 2:257, 4:60, 4:76), or Satan (Q 16:36, 5:60, 39:17). As one can see from the different words that are used to translate the term, the significance of *ṭaghūt* is not always clear. Salafists have a very particular understanding of it, which plays a major role in their discourse. Like many aspects of their theology, their understanding of *ṭaghūt* can be traced to Muḥammad b. ‘Abd al-Wahhāb (d. 1792) who wrote about it in his *Risālah fī ma’ nā ṭaghūt*. Here he identifies *ṭaghūt* specifically as the religious use of intermediaries to worship God, such as the saint cult.⁷⁴

Contemporary Salafists modified Ibn ‘Abd al-Wahhāb’s understanding of *ṭaghūt* to apply to political circumstances. They were able to do so because Islam to these individuals is a total system, meaning that everything in life must be seen through a religious perspective. This means that just as God is at the apex of religious power, so too must He be at the apex of political power. Consequently, if *ṭaghūt* means the use of intermediaries to worship God, it can also mean the use of intermediaries to usurp the sovereignty of God. In this case, Salafists understand the intermediaries to be democracy, constitutionalism, or any other form of political organization that is not based in Islam. In essence, they argue that all forms of secular government are *ṭaghūt*.⁷⁵

While ISIS fully accepts this understanding of *ṭaghūt*, when it speaks of oppression, it puts its own spin on the term, which becomes clear if we consider oppression in relation to hypocrisy as discussed above. In doing so, we see how ISIS argues that secular governments not only usurp God’s rightful role in the world but actually become religious oppressors themselves; they understand oppression in part as an involuntary regression to Murji’ism and the resultant hypocrisy that obeying secular law forces a Muslim to commit, a hypocrisy that risks turning a believer into an apostate.⁷⁶ Thus ISIS connects Murji’ism to the complaint of oppression and forms the basis of their objection to the recognized governments in Muslim countries: by implementing secular law these secular regimes oppress true religion and favor the false.

If we recall the original use of the word *ṭaghūt*, one connotation of which was “idol,” we see how ISIS anchors its use of the term in its traditional meaning, while simultaneously reinterpreting it. In doing so, it not only draws a connection between the current period and the Islamic past, implying that the impieties of today are remnants from those of yesterday, so further legitimizing itself as part of an eternal Islamic state; it also emphasizes that the hypocrisy it fights is part of an undying, recurrent threat to religious truth that must be defeated. In other words, ISIS represents itself as the only true inheritor of the Islamicizing (though not the prophetic) mission of Muḥammad.

By using *taġhūt* to describe the oppressive governments of today, ISIS makes the argument that these states are no different than the idols of the past: both draw the worshipper away from God and replace a Muslim's object of worship with ungodly things.⁷⁷ The connection between idolatry and unconscious hypocrisy is what completes the circle between oppression and Murji'ism. Murji'ism, or at least its political compromise with a government not based wholly in Islam, is oppressive because it forces potentially righteous individuals into unrighteous lives, oppressing them into unreligion. Consequently, the only reasonable, Islamic reaction is to overthrow those governments and implement a religious regime that would support what ISIS considers the true version of Islamic law, thereby freeing its adherents from the oppression of the unjust and enabling them to live truly Islamic lives. As a result, rebellion against such governments is really liberation, for nothing can be truer than to live in the way God, the creator, created humans to exist: according to His law.⁷⁸

In order to understand this fully, we note that ISIS considers politics to be a zero-sum game: whatever it loses is gained by its opponents and whatever its opponents lose, ISIS gains. Compromise is impossible, for it means both the absolute weakening of ISIS and the strengthening of its opponents. Moreover, because truth must be stronger than, and eventually vanquish, falsehood, the struggle to live a religious and moral life is a strictly win/lose contest: if one unrighteous element remains in righteous society, that society becomes instantly and irrevocably polluted, and pollution must be removed until purity is reached, constituting the *telos* of creation and supporting ISIS' apocalyptic narrative. This is the essence of their hastening the "extinction of the grayzone."

Of course, one can argue that there are many ways to overthrow the unrighteous, and that the ballot box, or cooperating with oppressive regimes, could be one of them. The potential for election to change governmental direction toward Islamic righteousness has long been a staple in moderate Islamic political thought, a principle embraced by such Islamic intellectuals as Mawdūdī, Yūsuf al-Qaraḍāwī, and others.⁷⁹ One of the most famous and influential parties endorsing this position has been the Muslim Brotherhood, a group that has played a key role in the development of Salafist thought as described above. The success and notoriety of the last group looms so large, in fact, that belief in the potential for democracy to produce an Islamic state is a heresy ISIS calls *ikhwāniyyah*, or the way of the (Muslim) Brotherhood (*Ikhwān al-Muslimīn*).⁸⁰

ISIS views *ikhwāniyyah* as compromise and considers it absolutely impossible. Why ISIS argues this derives from two primary considerations. The first is discussed above, namely that politics is a zero-sum game of absolute winners and absolute losers, and the hybrid that would result from using a sinful instrument such as democracy during the transition to absolute, unquestioned "Islamic" rule is unacceptable as a government under which righteous Muslims can live. The second reason ties into ISIS' understanding of Murji'ism. It is clear from its statements both in

Dabiq and elsewhere that ISIS views even the Brotherhood and other popular Islamic political organizations as being guilty of the sin of Murji'ism.

While we have seen that their strongest argument against Murji'ism's conflation of right and wrong concerns the involuntary hypocrisy Muslims within state systems experience, ISIS also condemns democracy for the oppression it visits on God. In their understanding of authority and sovereignty, the only legitimate sovereign authority is God, and claiming to have authority from any other source is sinful and arrogant. Since voting is clearly an act that legitimizes a power other than God's and creates a law that deviates from His command, the act of engaging with a secular government through voting and thereby legitimizing its power is a hypocritical act for the true Muslim. In essence, this argument brings the idea of *taghūt*, or false idols, to its logical conclusion by arguing that following corrupt regimes results in *shirk*, or polytheism, because one assigns what should be God's (sovereignty) to something else.⁸¹

This prohibits using democracy as a means to a righteous end because the means itself desecrates the divine. By the very fact of engagement with an oppressive or potentially oppressive power, one accepts *de facto* the authority of a power other than God, reducing one's faith through that action. Consequently, since the means of countering the system from within are iniquitous, even potentially playing the system against itself becomes an impossibility.

This uncompromising stance toward the oppressor forces a person into armed opposition to all governments other than the caliphate of ISIS. While a comprehensive discussion of ISIS' arguments for the importance of what it considers jihad within the correct practice of Islam is outside of the scope of our discussion, we should observe that fighting a holy war against the oppressors is one of the only ways of definitively removing oneself from potential stigma as a hypocrite, for only in open rebellion can one be sure that one is not contributing to the success of a regime based in a law other than God's and therefore causing oneself, no matter how unwillingly, to stray from the fold and become a hypocrite at best and an apostate at worst. In this way, the Murji'ite bundle functions as an intellectual complement to the physical isolation and commitment created through ISIS' emphasis on violence, which at once seduces potential recruits and simultaneously cuts them off from life and society outside of the Islamic State.⁸²

The result of this stance is to lock the followers of ISIS into its organization and leave no ideological room for escape. In a sense, one's Islam becomes defined as much by what one opposes as what one does, for it is not just performing God's obligations that makes one a Muslim, but also opposing anything that might trap one into sin. Ultimately these traps include any political organization that does not fall under ISIS' umbrella, making ISIS the single arbiter of what can legitimately be considered Islamic. Anything else is oppressive, for even if an organization outside of ISIS does not oppose ISIS actively, ISIS ensures that it is categorized in such a way

that it becomes an anathema, which is the true meaning of the “extinction of the grayzone” cited in *Dabiq* 7.

Conclusion

One of the most significant aspects of ISIS’ media output is its ability to use rhetoric to affect action in the world. Much of ISIS’ success in recruiting fighters from abroad, attracting separatist groups in countries as far flung as Libya and Afghanistan to affiliate with it as well as defectors from other Syrian rebel groups, has to do with its positioning itself as the only legitimate Islamic state and its caliphate as the realization of all legitimate Islamic political efforts. This does not imply that battlefield success or control of territory does not also play a key role in ISIS’ success as an organization, but the rhetoric and tangible successes feed each other. Moreover, its rhetoric supplied much of the basis for ISIS’ initial expansion and provided the spark that lit its explosion into the Syrian scene.

What is also significant is that ISIS does not create its rhetoric from whole cloth, but borrows pieces from the Islamic intellectual tradition in which it partakes. By using traditional Islamic tropes and themes, ISIS is able both to signal its legitimacy and direct the action of others to support its success in the fields of battle and politics. It cements its legitimacy, showing its erudition and mastery of complex theological and legal topics, and demonstrating that it has the best, most comprehensive and divinely sanctioned answers to the faithful’s questions.

In this paper, we have examined a single piece of this rhetoric: Murji’ism. By necessity we have narrowed our compass to the most prominent English language publications. Though we have had a narrow purview, it is a significant one. Murji’ism is clearly a topic ISIS cares deeply about, having discussed it in nearly every issue of *Dabiq*. It is also important because through what I call the Murji’ite bundle, ISIS is able to link complicated but compelling arguments through a simple theme that is unarguably Islamic, grounded in the tradition’s history. It is also significant that ISIS has been able to plug into three of the major bugbears of Salafist thought—hypocrisy, innovation, and oppression—using a single trope.

While this paper has been concerned with a single theme, there are many other tropes within ISIS’ materials that beg for similar treatment, such as its use of Murji’ism’s correlate, Kharijism. Only through understanding many of these themes will we begin to comprehend the power and allure ISIS has over its supporters and the nature of its appeal to Muslims throughout the world.

Above all, we see that Murji’ism is a theological concept that is alive and well, one that is capable of being adapted to new contexts and uses. When combined with its partners in the bundle, it is a comprehensive whole that many individuals find compelling and hard to refute. When they do so, however, it is often by using the same categories and terms ISIS itself does, a fact we can see by

reviewing the anti-ISIS writings of individuals like Maqdisī. Consequently, understanding the soft power of ISIS will go a long way to countering its hard power, for crafting a strategy to argue against its intellectual positions is as important as creating one to capture its military positions.

Understanding that ISIS does not operate in a vacuum, that it is not a spontaneous product of political instability, is also important. Without understanding the ideological, economic, social, and political factors that gave rise to it, it will be impossible to counter its extremism, and accomplishing the latter is predicated on the former. This effort is often complicated by a tendency to belittle the Islamic credentials of ISIS and its constituents. While it is certainly true that many of its fighters are not very well-educated in Islamic tradition, it is a serious mistake to assume that ISIS does not have its own very learned and erudite scholars. When attempting to understand how ISIS can accomplish the things that it does and convince people to go along with it, it is not to the fighter we must look, but rather to the scholar. This paper is intended to be a step in that direction.

About the author

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Notes

All digital content cited in this article was accessed on or before September 21, 2016.

[1] I would like to thank this paper's reviewers for their insightful comments and help with sources. Without their advice, this would be a far inferior product to what it is.

[2] Saleh Said Agha, "[A Viewpoint of the Murji'a in the Umayyad Period: Evolution through Application](#)," *Journal of Islamic Studies* 8 (1997): 1–42, 2.

[3] Hugh Kennedy, [The Prophet and the Age of the Caliphates: The Islamic Near East from the Sixth to the Eleventh Century](#) (3rd ed.; London: Routledge, 2016), 68–69. This is the traditional explanation of Kharijism. For a more detailed discussion see Jeffrey Kearney, *Muslim Rebels* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006): 19–53.

[4] Understanding the historical development of Islamic ideas that lay outside of the standard orthodoxy is complicated. The historical record is often highly edited by later scholars to produce

heresies and doctrines that suit the purposes and arguments of later periods. The account of Murji'ism I describe here relies on the narrative passed down to us through traditional historians. I have done so to make the discussion easier for readers who may not have a technical background in Islamic intellectual history to understand, but also because this is the history of Murji'ism as ISIS understands it, and that which they use in their discussion of the subject. The major heresiographers that have supplied this narrative background are Abū Manṣūr al-Baghdādī (d. 1037) and al-Shahrastānī (d. 1153). Their accounts have been rounded out with modern scholarship to provide what might be considered a traditional account of Murji'ism.

[5] Agha, "A Viewpoint of the Murji'a in the Umayyad Period," 4–5.

[6] An alternative, though less accepted, meaning is "hope." Muḥammad b. 'Abd al-Karīm al-Shahrastānī, *Muslim Sects and Divisions*, trans. A. K. Kazi and J. G. Flynn (London: Kegan Paul International, 1984), 119.

[7] Wilferd Madelung, "Murjī'a," *EI²*, s.v. (1993).

[8] Tariq Jaffer, "Murji'is," in Gerhard Bowering (ed.), [The Princeton Encyclopedia of Islamic Political Thought](#) (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2013), 380–381.

[9] Josef van Ess, "Das 'Kitāb al-Irḡā'" des Ḥasan b. Muḥammad b. al-Ḥanafīyya," *Arabica* 21 (1974): 20–52, 20–25.

[10] *Imān* may better understood as "belief," since faith is often understood to be a combination of both actions and belief, but ISIS itself seems to use "faith" as its preferred translation for *imān*, and I will maintain that usage here.

[11] J. Meric Pessagno, "The Murji'a, Imān and Abū 'Ubayd," *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 95 (1975): 382–394.

[12] Wilferd Madelung, "The Early Murji'ia in Khurāsān and Transoxania and the Spread of Ḥanafism," in *Religious Schools and Sects in Medieval Islam* (London: Variorum Reprints, 1985), 33.

[13] Agha, "A Viewpoint of the Murji'a in the Umayyad Period," 18–21.

[14] Madelung, "The Early Murji'ia," 33.

[15] Agha, "A Viewpoint of the Murji'a in the Umayyad Period," 18–21.

[16] Agha, “A Viewpoint of the Murji’a in the Umayyad Period,” 21; Madelung, “Mur_dji’a.”

[17] Shahrastānī, *Muslim Sects and Divisions*, 121; Madelung, “Mur_dji’a”; Joseph Schacht, “An Early Murci’ite Treatise: The Kitāb al-‘Ālim wal-Muta‘allim,” *Oriens* 17 (1964): 96–117.

[18] Schacht, “An Early Murci’ite Treatise,” 102, 105–6.

[19] Madelung, “The Early Murji’a.”

[20] Agha, “A Viewpoint of the Murji’a in the Umayyad Period,” 21.

[21] Jaffer, “Murji’is,” 380.

[22] For a discussion of the various scholars who have used this charge historically and the targets of their accusation, see the article by Pessagno referenced above.

[23] Daniel Lav, [*Radical Islam and the Revival of Medieval Theology*](#) (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 6, 8; Joas Wagemakers, [*A Quietist Jihadi: The Ideology and Influence of Abu Muhammad al-Maqdisi*](#) (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012): 64, 66. On the term ‘Jihadi-Salafist,’ see below.

[24] See Cole Bunzel, [*From Paper State to Caliphate: The Ideology of the Islamic State*](#), *The Brookings Project on U.S. Relations with the Islamic World*, Analysis Paper 19 (March 2015): 9–11 and Graeme Wood, [*What ISIS Really Wants*](#), *The Atlantic*, March 2015, among others.

[25] This does not mean that debate on these issues ceased entirely or that total consensus was reached, but fundamental doctrinal questions such as general notions of the uncreatedness of the Qur’ān, who can claim to be a believer, and what is the proper understanding of the role of prophets in the world were generally fixed by the twelfth century. Even if Sunnis and Shi’ah came to somewhat different conclusions, these groups largely agreed among themselves and focused their debates on other issues. It also does not mean that Murji’ism was totally abandoned. As discussed above, scholars continued to use the term derogatorily and Ibn Taymiyyah had recourse to it in his attempts to rally action against the Mongols (see Lav and Wagemakers for more details), but it and many other theological issues ceased to be the center of intellectual attention.

[26] It should be admitted that this dichotomy is a simplistic one and that both modernizing and counter-modernizing movements have borrowed much from one another, but the details of this are beyond this paper’s scope. Consequently, this dichotomy is used as a heuristic.

[27] Following Dallal, I do not claim that all of the fundamentalist movements have emerged from Wahhabism, but they do share certain common features; since Wahhabism is the major influence on ISIS, I emphasize it here. Ahmad Dallal, “The Origins and Objective of Islamic Revivalist Thought, 1750-1850,” *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 113 (1993): 341–359.

[28] Here we find a primary distinction between many of the fundamentalist movements found in South Asia, such as Deobandism, that are tolerant of saint cults and many of the Wahhabi-inspired movements that view such acts with opprobrium.

[29] Wagemakers, *The Quietist Jihadi*, 72–3.

[30] It should be noted here that not all Salafists are violent or advocate violence. Many are, in fact, quite adamant about remaining peaceful and bringing about truly Islamic regimes through education and proselytization (*da‘wah*) rather than violent action. I will use the term “Jihadi-Salafist” here to indicate those Salafists who advocate warfare as a way to Islamic government, as opposed to their quietist brethren.

[31] Lav, *Radical Islam*, 55–58, 73–76, 88–89; Wagemakers, *The Quietist Jihadi*, 12, 61–64.

[32] Lav, *Radical Islam*, 53–58.

[33] Lav, *Radical Islam*; Wagemakers, *The Quietist Jihadi*, 225–226.

[34] Wagemakers, *The Quietist Jihadi*, 99–108.

[35] The practice of accusing one’s fellow Muslim of being an unbeliever, typically for political purposes.

[36] Wagemakers, *The Quietist Jihadi*, 66–68.

[37] See “From Hijrah to Khilafah,” *Dabiq* 1 (Ramaḍān 1435 [June-July 2014]): 34–41; “Dismantling a Khārijī Cell,” *Dabiq* 6 (Rabī‘ al-Awwal 1436 [December-January 2014]): 31; “Al-Qā‘idah of Waziristan,” *ibid.*, 51–55, 51; “Iṛjā’: The Most Dangerous Bid‘ah (And its Effect on the Jihād in Shām),” *Dabiq* 8 (Jumādā al-Ākhirah 1436 [March-April 2015]): 39–56, 50, 55; “The ‘Mahdī’ of the Rāfidah: The Dajjāl,” *Dabiq* 11 (Dhū'l-Qa‘dah 1436 [August-September 2014]): 16–17, 16; and “The Revival of Jihād in Bengal: With the Spread of the Light of the Khilāfah,” *Dabiq* 12 (Ṣafar 1437 [November-December 2015]): 37–41, 39.

[38] The analysis of ISIS’ rhetoric that follows is drawn largely from their English language magazine *Dabiq*. The choice to do this has been made because *Dabiq* represents one of the

most cohesive and largest sources of information approved by ISIS' officials that exists, is definitively linked to the Islamic State, and is easily accessible beyond its borders without mediation by journalists, ideologues, or other parties.

The separate instances of ISIS' references to Murji'ism and Murji'ites are too numerous to list. In this paper, we are focused on their use of the term in widely disseminated, English-language media such as Abū Bakr al-Baghdādī's speech proclaiming the caliphate, "This is the Promise of Allah," and *Dabiq* (Murji'ism is mentioned in *Dabiq* 1, 2, 6, 7, 8, 10, 11, and 12). A basic examination of French and Arabic sources indicates ISIS use of this term is constant across its publications.

[39] "Hijrah from Hypocrisy to Sincerity" and "The Fear of Hypocrisy," *Dabiq* 3 (Shawwāl 1435 [July-August 2014]): 25–27; "Bad Company Destroys the Heart," *ibid.*, 32; and "The Extinction of the Grayzone," *Dabiq* 7 (Rabī' al-Ākhir 1436 [January-February 2015]): 54–66, 64.

[40] See as an example Maqdisī's statement on this point: Abū Muḥammad al-Maqdisī, "Li-mādhā lam ussimuhum ḥattā al-ān khawārij raghma an fihim min hum aswa' min al-khawārij" ["Why Did I Not Call Them Kharijites Until Now, Even Though Some of Them Are Worse Than Kharijites"], June-July 2015 (<http://justpaste.it/khawarej1>; English translation posted at <https://pietervanostaeyen.com/2015/06/25/shaykh-abu-muhammad-al-maqdisi-why-did-i-not-name-them-khawarij-even-until-now/>). There are many other quietist Salafis who call ISIS Kharijites, such as the posters at www.salafisounds.com, e.g. Abu Maryam, "[General Advice Regarding the Khawarij Terrorists by Abu Khadeejah](#)," November 2015.

[41] "Iṛjā'," 39–56.

[42] "Iṛjā'," 42.

[43] See, for example, their pejorative use of the word "maddhabī," an example of which we find in "Al-Qā'idah of Waziristan," 49, as well as their concern with *fitnah*, which is discussed and condemned in every issue of *Dabiq*. *Fitnah* is especially connected with Murji'ism in "Dismantling a Khārijī Cell," 31. See also "Iṛjā'," 53 and "The Evil of Division and Taqlīd," *Dabiq* 11 (Dhū'l-Qa'dah 1436 [August-September 2014]): 10–14.

[44] "Iṛjā'," 42.

[45] The scholars cited include Ibn Taymiyyah, Muḥammad b. 'Abd al-Wahhāb, Sufyān al-Thawrī, Ibrahim al-Nakhā'ī, and many others.

[46] This is not wholly without precedent in classical scholarship: see as an example the condemnation of the Murji'a in Abū Manṣūr al-Baghdādī, *Moslem Schisms and Sects*, trans. Kate Seelye (New York: AMS Press, 1966), 37.

[47] “Iṛjā’,” 52.

[48] Ibid.

[49] Abū Bakr al-Baghdādī, “This is the Promise of Allah” (<https://www.actforamerica.org/downloads/IS-Declaration-of-Caliphate.pdf>).

[50] “Iṛjā’,” 54. For a discussion of the importance of implementing the “correct” form of shari'ah, see William McCants, *The ISIS Apocalypse: The History, Strategy, and Doomsday Vision of the Islamic State* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2015), 57–58, 82.

[51] “Iṛjā’,” 56.

[52] James Robson, “Bid‘a,” *Et*², s.v. (1960).

[53] Mary Dudziak, *September 11 in History: A Watershed Moment?* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2008), 71.

[54] Andrea Mura, *The Symbolic Scenarios of Islamism: A Study in Islamic Political Thought* (London: Routledge, 2015): 170–171.

[55] “Iṛjā’,” 39; “The Evil of Division and Taqlīd,” 10; “A Fatwā for Khurāsān,” *Dabiq* 10 (Ramaḍān 1436 [June-July 2015]), 18–24, 21.

[56] Dudziak, 71.

[57] “The ‘Mahdī’ of the Rāfidah,” 39.

[58] The enactors of *bid‘ah* are associated with alcoholics and homosexuals, “Bad Company Destroys the Heart,” 32; “The Evil of Division and Taqlīd,” 13. See “And as for the Blessing of Your Lord, then Mention It,” *Dabiq* 12 (Ṣafar 1437 [November-December 2015]): 29–32, 32 for a discussion of the concern with which members of the Islamic state debate whether a thing is *bid‘ah* or not.

[59] “Iṛjā’,” 39.

[60] "It's Either the Islamic State or the Flood," *Dabiq* 2 (Ramaḍān 1435 [June-July 2014], 5; "The Extinction of the Grayzone," 62, 66; "Iṛjā'," 50.

[61] "Iṛjā'," 40; "Hijrah from Hypocrisy to Sincerity"; and "The Fear of Hypocrisy," 25–27.

[62] Especially the "palace scholars"; see below.

[63] This is the theme of an extended discussion in "Hijrah from Hypocrisy to Sincerity," 25–34.

[64] "The Extinction of the Grayzone."

[65] *Ibid.*, 55.

[66] *Ibid.*

[67] "Iṛjā'," 49.

[68] "Hijrah from Hypocrisy to Sincerity" and "The Fear of Hypocrisy," 25–26.

[69] *Dabiq* 3, 7, 8, 12, 13, as well as the speech "This is the Promise of Allah."

[70] As a result of this dichotomy, in ISIS' world, 'non-Islamic' and 'anti-Islamic' are identical.

[71] For this argument, see especially "Hijrah from Hypocrisy to Sincerity" and "The Fear of Hypocrisy," 25–27; "And as for the Blessing of Your Lord, then Mention It," 29–32.

[72] "Iṛjā'," 42.

[73] "Iṛjā'," 43–50; "Kill the Imāms of Kufr," *Dabiq* 13 (Rabī' al-Ākhir 1437 [January-February 2016]), 6–9.

[74] Dallal, 349.

[75] Lav, *Radical Islam*, 143.

[76] See "The Fear of Hypocrisy," 26–27. For ISIS' argument that this is happening now in Syria, see "And as for the Blessing of Your Lord, then Mention It," 31.

[77] "The Concept of Imamah is from the Millah of Ibrahim," *Dabiq* 1 (Ramaḍān 1435 [June-July 2014]): 13; "And as for the Blessing of Your Lord, then Mention It," 29.

[78] “And as for the Blessing of Your Lord, then Mention It,” 29.

[79] Abū'l-A'īn al-Mawdūdī, *Political Theory of Islam* (Lahore: Islamic Publications, 1993), 35; Yusūf al-Qaraḍāwī, “Islam and Democracy,” in *Princeton Readings in Islamist Thought*, eds. Roxanne Euben and Muhammad Qasim Zaman (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2009), 230–245.

[80] “Iṛjā’,” 54.

[81] “The Anger Factory,” *Dabiq* 7 (Rabī' al-Ākhir 1436 [January-February 2015]): 76–81 (found in a footnote the theological content of which makes it unlikely to have been written by John Cantlie). For a discussion of the emergence of this position in Islamic radical thought, see Emmanuel Sivan, *Radical Islam* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1985), 73–76.

[82] A point explored by Jessica Stern and J. M. Berger in *ISIS: The State of Terror* (New York: HarperCollins, 2015).

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