

THE SECTARIANISM OF THE ISLAMIC STATE: IDEOLOGICAL ROOTS AND POLITICAL CONTEXT

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Forces throughout the Middle East are attempting to roll back the self-proclaimed Islamic State, which seized territory in Iraq and Syria in 2014. But regardless of how the jihadi group fares militarily, its ideology remains a long-term challenge. The Islamic State's ideology is multifaceted and cannot be traced to one individual, movement, or period. Understanding it is crucial to defeating the group.

A Hybrid Ideology

- The Islamic State presents itself as the representative of authentic Islam as practiced by the early generations of Muslims—Salafism—and it draws on an especially strict brand of Salafism in particular, Wahhabism.
- It is overly simplistic, however, to blame any one ideology for the Islamic State's extremism. Its extremism is the product of a hybridization of doctrinaire Salafism and other Islamist currents.
- The Islamic State relies on the jihadi literature of ideologues who support its stance as well as clerics who do not formally support the group. These clerics adhere to a set of ideas that significantly deviate from mainstream Islam, and many are direct heirs of the *Sahwa*, an intellectual religious movement that began in earnest in the 1970s.
- The *Sahwa* blended Salafi concepts with revolutionary ideas from political Islam in a broad sense, but primarily currents influenced by the Muslim Brotherhood. The intermarriage polarized and produced new and unpredictable religious currents.
- Politically submissive Salafism gave way to political *takfirism*—excommunication after one Muslim declares another an infidel or apostate. This ideology carries the banner of caliphate, jihad, and rebellion.
- The Islamic State is part of a legacy of *takfiri* schools and ideas to emerge from al-Qaeda. But the Islamic State's ideological rigidity stands out. Its refusal to bend creates a culture of *takfirism* within *takfirism*.

The Ideology in Practice

- The Islamic State promotes a political ideology and a worldview that actively classifies and excommunicates fellow Muslims.
- The group is adept at cultivating and exploiting preexisting sectarian fissures in the Middle East. The Islamic State taps into communal hatred and religious concepts to recruit and justify its acts, or to foster sympathy and neutralize forces that actively reject it. It has proven particularly powerful in outbidding al-Qaeda for recruits.
- It uses clerics' material to justify the *takfir* of the Saudi state and Muslim rulers across the Middle East, and to support the rejection of official institutions and forces.
- For the Islamic State, clerics offer justifications for its savagery, especially against fellow Muslims. And the group cites stories from early Islamic history to justify its brutal practices to new recruits.

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