

# Islam and the Politics of Temporality: The Case of ISIS

Written by Shahzad Bashir

This PDF is auto-generated for reference only. As such, it may contain some conversion errors and/or missing information. For all formal use please refer to the official version on the website, as linked below.

## Islam and the Politics of Temporality: The Case of ISIS

<https://www.e-ir.info/2016/07/28/islam-and-the-politics-of-temporality-the-case-of-isis/>

SHAHZAD BASHIR, JUL 28 2016

**This is an excerpt from *Time, Temporality and Global Politics* – an E-IR Edited Collection.**

**Available now on Amazon (UK, USA, Ca, Ger, Fra), in all good book stores, and via a free PDF download.  
Find out more about E-IR's range of open access books here**

As human beings we are bound by time. While we can probably all agree that our experiences have temporal coordinates, beyond this, the matter gets more equivocal. What exactly is time? How does it function? In what direction does it flow (and what does it mean to say that it 'flows')? Abstract discussions of such matters abound in modern scholarship and are the province of physicists and philosophers. The understanding of time structures human cognition and response to the material world, which makes it a fundamental concern in the social sciences and the humanities. Time is an element within sociocultural imaginations that can vary greatly between contexts. Attending to temporality can be an advantageous venue for exploring complex and internally variegated topics such as the contemporary politics of Islam.

I should clarify that my concern in this chapter is only with the human experience of time. Following David Couzens Hoy, I will designate this 'temporality' in order to distinguish the matter from time perceived as an abstract universal (Hoy 2009: xiii). Temporality is implicated in human experiences and ways of thinking and has been the subject of extensive philosophical exploration (for example, Newton-Smith 1980). Within the study of international relations, temporal presumptions are the basis for value-laden categories that saturate popular media as well as specialised literature. The notion of progress, whether understood in liberal or Marxist frames, and the associated differentiation between economically developed and underdeveloped countries are premised on a temporal scale in which some people are seen as being ahead while others require catching up (Hutchings 2008). Such distinctions follow from an earlier anthropological positing of 'primitive' societies, understood as the past of Western societies despite being contemporaneous in the literal sense (Fabian 2014). In ordinary usage, Western temporality that dominates in the international sphere has become synonymous with abstract time. The elision has reified this temporality and its associated hierarchies, causing observers to understand its inner logic as a natural fact rather than the effect of a particular political regime that has been dominant in recent centuries (Hom 2010).

The conception of the international system as an object of study too rests on a particular temporality. It takes the current norms of Euro-American societies as the future of those outside this sphere, without reference to contingencies pertaining to sociocultural and historical differences (Inayatullah and Blaney 2004; Hobson 2012). Temporal presumptions underlie almost all understandings of international politics; occasional academic criticism of the hierarchical view of the world that results from this has had little effect on general public discourse in most parts of the world. While economic development is usually at the forefront of relative valuation, this always has sociocultural counterparts. Those who have less money are often thought to lag behind in moral, social, and cultural sophistication as well. In this way, Western temporal benchmarks that operate in the background of analytical paradigms tend to predetermine how the non-Western world gets portrayed in popular media and scholarship.

### Islam between Medievality and Reformation

# Islam and the Politics of Temporality: The Case of ISIS

Written by Shahzad Bashir

Temporal markers are a staple in present-day descriptions of the politics of Islam and Muslims, although this topic has not received extensive analytical attention. Consider, for example, the frequency with which the term 'medieval' is used to discuss contemporary individuals and groups claiming to act in the name of Islam.<sup>[1]</sup> From the 1980s, influential authors have described anti-establishment movements claiming Islamic identities as cases of amalgamation between medieval theology and modern politics (for example, Sivan 1985). In doing so, scholars, and the journalists to follow them, have taken the rhetoric of the groups they were attempting to understand at face value rather than seeing them as creative modern readers of selected premodern works. Western scholars were predisposed to this perspective because of the governing logic of orientalism, the academic and popular discourse that has framed Muslims as quintessential 'others' since the nineteenth century. In this view, Islam is seen to have an ahistorical essence that became settled at a point in the 'medieval' period. This essence has then imprisoned Islam in some past time, making Muslims beholden to 'tradition' in a way that is not true for other religious communities. This perspective remains influential today: prominent scholars continue to argue for Muslims' exceptionality as political actors on the basis of claiming features supposedly inherent in Islam irrespective of context (for example, Cook 2014). As I have argued elsewhere, this is a theological view that has come to be seen as 'secular' history due to the way Western scholars have privileged certain Islamic discourses about the past as repositories of an essential Islam (Bashir 2014). I believe this academic framing needs a wholesale corrective. An alternative approach, more compelling to me, is to see Muslims as active agents who have, through history, created multiple pasts to serve intellectual and sociopolitical interests perceived as being relevant for their present situations.

The use of the term 'medieval' for contemporary Muslims derives from a seemingly self-evident, valorised temporal scale that has its origins in the purported historical trajectories of European societies. The term's efficacy rests on two steps. First, the adjective medieval is marked as a negative past, from which Europe and its socio-intellectual descendants are supposed to have progressed via development over time. As scholars of European history have emphasised, mediocrity is a modern intellectual construct whose chief purpose is to posit the superiority of the modern age (Symes 2011). And second, when contemporary Muslims actors are referred to as medieval, they are relegated to Europe's negatively valued past. The result should look incongruous: people adept at the use of electronic media and advanced mechanical weapons, operating in Asia and Africa, are being imaged in a European world associated with manuscripts and swords. The ludicrousness of the juxtaposition misses the eye because medieval here is a marker of moral disapprobation rather than a description of the peoples in question. The term's deployment accomplishes the double task of distancing 'us' from surpassed ancestors and unworthy contemporaries. Those who use the term for Islamic groups certainly mean it to be negative. Placing this judgment within a seemingly self-evident time scale reifies the commentators' own temporality and renders it above critical assessment. The temporal argument enfolded within the use of the term medieval creates the illusion that the judgment on offer is an objective fact rather than being an expression of particular intellectual and sociopolitical interests.

While medieval implies adjudication on the basis of a scale of general cultural development, the view that Islam either needs, or is experiencing, a 'reformation' transfers the same temporal logic to a specifically religious arena. The idea of a totalising reformation, which is different from general piecemeal change and reform, has been raised by Muslims and non-Muslims alike, belonging to many different places on the contemporary political spectrum (an-Naim 1996; Browsers and Kurzman 2004; Ali 2015, and many others). The obvious point of reference here is the history of Christianity, which is being universalised and made the supposed timeline for Islam. Just as the Protestant Reformation purportedly redeemed Europe from Catholic Christianity, the helping hand of modern European ideas is supposed to make Muslims into secular modern peoples (Mahmood 2006). The effect is to negate the possibility that the religion of Muslims may have a history independent of Christianity, connected not to views of Europe but to contingencies pertaining to the histories of their own communities. This kind of elision between Christianity and Islam is foundational also to the category religion, which evolved out of Christian ideas and has universalised the application of Christian patterns across non-Christian contexts (Masuzawa 2005).

To call certain contemporary Muslims medieval, and to suggest that Islam needs a reformation, are matters that index unstated temporal presumptions and their associated moral verdicts. The use of such terms masks cultural, political, and military agendas and is helpful for generating public fervour for the actions of certain states. However, such usage should have little analytical purchase when it comes to understanding the actors to whom the terms are

# Islam and the Politics of Temporality: The Case of ISIS

Written by Shahzad Bashir

applied. In fact, judging Muslims and others according to historical trajectories of Western societies is a widespread fallacy that has been the cause of obfuscation rather than analytical advancement. To correct this situation, it is necessary to consider the particulars of temporalities embedded within non-European discourses. This has the benefit of relativising Euro-American perspectives while also providing more meaningful access to human experience in a broader, more universal frame.

I should emphasise that my purpose here is not to posit a binary opposition between Western and Islamic temporalities. Ideas and technological developments that originated in the West have had a profound effect on how Muslims today understand their own pasts. And we can also show that Muslim and other temporalities matter for understanding the West. But crosscutting impact of this nature cannot be seen as preordained according to the way Euro-American societies may have developed. To assess Muslim temporalities requires analysis of data emanating directly from the subjects in question. Recent discussions in the philosophy of history have shown that Western societies have been (and are) host to many different understandings of temporality (Jordheim 2014). The same needs to be presumed for Islamic contexts: analysis should proceed from the fact that Muslim understandings of the experience of time are multiple and changeable. When it comes to temporality, neither the 'West' nor 'Islam' are hermetically sealed entities. Both words reference internally variegated fields, encompassing description as well as rhetoric, in which temporalities are critical elements within the evolution of ideas and practices. To concentrate on Islamic temporalities is, therefore, the opposite of the effort to specify the exclusive essence of Islam as sought in orientalist scholarship or Islamic theological discourses.

## The Rise of ISIS

In contemporary international affairs, the group that has come to be known as ISIS (Islamic State in Iraq and al-Sham) or Daesh (ad-Dawla al-Islāmiyya fī l-'Irāq wa-sh-Shām) is a particularly vivid case for the politics of temporality and Islam. Here is an entity that has frequently been called medieval since its appearance. Moreover, the group's propaganda actively promotes the understanding that it is a kind of re-enlivening of an Islamic past radically at odds with orthodoxies identified with modernity. We can see this prominently in its declaration of the worldwide caliphate on 29 June 2014, recalling a religiopolitical formation with origins in the seventh century CE (Poirson and Oprisko 2014; al-Rasheed, Kersten and Shterin 2012). Its self-proclaimed founding leader is known by the *kunya* (part of an Arab name) Abu Bakr, referring to the name of the first successor to Prophet Muhammad. The choice of the name implies an erasure of time between the seventh and the twenty-first centuries CE.

Reports issued by the United Nations indicate that populations of the territory under the control of ISIS have been subjected to policies that the group claims were the military-political norms of the early Islamic period. This has involved widespread summary use of force against groups identified as Yezidis, Christians, Kaka'is, Kurds, Mandeans, the Shi'a, and the Turkmen. The treatment has reportedly included killing, torture, and forced conversion of men and boys, and the distribution of 'unbelieving' women and girls as sexually permissible 'spoils of war' among male ISIS fighters (UN Report 2015).<sup>[2]</sup> For the case of sexual slavery, the group has issued a five-page pamphlet that mimics traditional Islamic legal discourse in a highly reductive way (Anonymous 2014). It provides absolute opinions in the form of 34 questions and answers that justify the group's practices. To date, examinations of statements and acts attributed to ISIS have attempted to place them in the timeline of practices known from other Islamic contexts. Such discussions privilege an Islamic tradition continuous over time and adjudicate whether, and how, ISIS corresponds with earlier perspectives (McCants et. al. 2015). Inasmuch as ISIS ideologues do selectively cite Islamic sources such as the Quran and hadith, should we take their rhetoric of the unmediated return to an earlier Islamic era on face value?

I argue that we should be sceptical regarding the claims made by ISIS. However, my reason for saying this is not that I believe Islam to have essential characteristics that are absent in the group. In historical perspective, Islam cannot have an essence since a religion has to be understood as that which its proponents think and do in all its variety. Whenever an essence is invoked in a religious context, a theological rather than sociohistorical claim is coming into play. Islam should be seen as a perennially changeable affair described through reference to historically locatable ideas and practices. I suggest that ISIS operates on the basis of temporal processes and understandings that make its politics very much a contemporary affair. Rather than mapping continuities or discontinuities with a tradition,

# Islam and the Politics of Temporality: The Case of ISIS

Written by Shahzad Bashir

proponents of ISIS should be seen as producers of a discourse that deploys its temporality for sociopolitical ends. Temporal understandings and practices both structure its observable perspective and are available for manipulation for propagandistic purposes.

## An Electronic Caliphate at War

ISIS has weaponised time. While ISIS is neither the first nor the sole entity to do so, the movement is the most prominent Islamic case of the phenomenon present on the world stage at the moment. It is a warring faction operating in a region that has been subject to a foreign invasion and endemic political insecurity for more than a decade. Temporal elements projected in its propaganda are parts of the arsenal it deploys through present-day ways and means. In the movement's ideological self-presentation, the world is divided between believers and non-believers, 'us' and 'them', on the basis of claiming absolute knowledge of a distant past. Through a kind of temporal telescoping, affinities and antagonisms sedimented over fourteen centuries are stripped of their historical contexts and are purveyed as absolute religious truths. This has resulted in practices that are justified through historical precedent but without allowing for contextual contingency or change over time. This is a temporality with a very shallow horizon whose very sparseness and crudity is presented as the guarantee of its veracity.

ISIS deploys the past as a weapon primarily through the internet, a medium that has become available widely only during the past quarter of a century. The internet provides a spatiotemporal field quite different from earlier media such as manuscript culture, print, and broadcasting. It allows for instantaneous dissemination of a universalising ideology, such as a caliphal state that is meant to administer the affairs of Muslims on a global scale. While the idea of the caliphate has appealed to Muslim ruling elites at various points in history, its deployment by ISIS is unique and is made possible by the availability of the internet. To the best of my knowledge, no other declaration of the caliphate in Islamic history has ever brought adherents from many corners of the world into the lap of a political movement within a very short period. Here, the internet as a medium is not simply a novel way to distribute propaganda. Rather, the movement's highly charged, yet minimalist message is engineered to maximise the potential inherent in the means of communication. Thanks to the internet, ISIS has a global audience that responds to its messages instantaneously, whether positively or negatively. The movement's ideological output is keyed to this temporal advantage; the partial success of the strategy is visible in stories about people trekking from all over the world to join the group.

The internet has created a new kind of 'Islamic world' where it is possible to enact and maintain a globally interconnected Islamic identity irrespective of geographical distances. If al-Qaeda, deterritorialised after 2001, was an incipient stage of this development (Devji 2005), ISIS presents a more mature and administratively adept case of the phenomenon. The internet allows ISIS to disseminate its propaganda speedily, in high, uninterrupted frequency. The effects of this ideological projection vary based on the social context of the point of reception. Among likely sympathisers, the minimalism of the propaganda allows for it to be read variably, creating multiple paths through which people can join the movement. The resulting 'community' is one part virtual, spread around the world, and another part localised to the regions in Iraq and Syria where the movement holds political power. The movement's virtual and real sides are mutually reinforcing: electronic messaging creates the conditions for people to join the group while the expansion in ranks leads to enlarging its presence on the internet. For the movement's detractors, the shallowness of the propaganda makes it jejune, its attraction for some seemingly inexplicable. However, the minimalist message, and the medium through which this is delivered, are keyed to the low common denominator that is presumed to be dispersed in a global audience. The presence of ISIS propaganda on Euro-American television, computer, and mobile phone screens is part of the same process that carries Western ideologies in the form of cultural products to other parts of the world. In the enactment of an electronic caliphate, contraction of time and space resulting from recent proliferation of electronic communication may have turned out to have startlingly unpredictable consequences.

## Archaeology of an Emblem

A consideration of the imagery found on the ISIS flag highlights a different but equally significant vector of temporality. The flag predates the prominence of ISIS and has been used by numerous other groups that have had

# Islam and the Politics of Temporality: The Case of ISIS

Written by Shahzad Bashir

similar political and cultural agendas. It contains two Arabic texts: on top, the phrase 'there is no god but God' in white with black background, and on the bottom, 'God, Messenger, Muhammad' in black inside a white roundel. In themselves, these words are unremarkable in an Islamic context. They indicate the first part of the affirmation of faith and the declaration of Muhammad's prophecy. The flag's distinctive 'message' lies in its colour (black has been associated with revolutionary movements) and the crudeness of the script that is meant to signify closeness to Islamic origins. The flag of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia contains substantially the same text, in elegant script in white placed on green background. The use of this flag by ISIS and other groups likely reflects contestation over the sphere claimed by Saudi Arabia as the state that controls the lands of Islam's origins and regularly portrays itself as the guardian of Sunni Islamic values.<sup>[3]</sup>

When considering temporality, the most interesting aspect of the ISIS flag is the crudeness of the script and the placement of the three words in a roundel. The latter is thought to represent the impression of a seal used by the Prophet Muhammad. No reliable data is currently available on the exact source of the seal image, which is an important point of information in itself. What matters is the image, differentiated from the flowing cursive of the flag of Saudi Arabia and asserting authority through a generalised visual appeal to antiquity. The purported seal, whatever its provenance, may have acted as a relic, an object of religious power utilised by elite patrons. What we have here, instead, is an image without the original, whose potency resides in its endless reproduction through mechanical and electronic means. The image's lack of symbolic specificity invites varied interpretations, allowing it to be a unifying factor without requiring ideological depth or substantive conformity of purpose.<sup>[4]</sup>

The image contained in the flag signifies age through its form, recalling objects usually encountered in modern museums. Such institutions embody a particular ideological perspective on the past connected to Western epistemologies that have by now globalised (Karp 2006). Again, the contrast with the text on the flag of Saudi Arabia is instructive and reflects a mass objectification of the past that is of quite recent provenance. The image indicates an archaising appeal to authority, akin to the way modern states use images of objects unearthed and preserved by archaeologists as national symbols. The region in which ISIS predominates has received extensive archaeological attention since the nineteenth century. Iraqi and Syrian nationalisms have strong archaeological components (Bernhardsson 2005), reflected in the proliferation of images on common use objects such as currency and stamps in both countries. These usages project *longue durée* genealogies for the nation, displaced from the messy circumstances of the present, yet fully tangible in the form of museum objects and buildings of the past that can be visited in the course of nationalist pilgrimages.

The symbol of ISIS is the image of an old object—and not simply a text—that similarly attempts to eradicate sociohistorical complexities through appeal to pristine primordality. The movement's well publicised antipathy towards certain antiquities, exhibited in the selling or destruction of objects, is better understood as the effort to eliminate competition rather than the exercise of some age old Islamic iconoclasm. As in the case of Taliban destruction of the Buddhas in Bamiyan, Afghanistan, in 2001, locally immediate material and ideological conditions are far more significant here than religious ideas often portrayed as essential to Islamic belief. For both ISIS today and the Taliban earlier, the occlusion of these factors in most Western media coverage reflects the power of unconscious presumptions regarding Muslims and the past (Elias 2007; Bernbeck 2010).

## The End of Time

*Dabiq* is an official online magazine published by ISIS in multiple languages since Ramadan 1435 (July 2014). Between the first and the tenth issue (July 2015), it has grown in size from approximately 50 to 75 pages. The magazine's contents are diverse: religiopolitical proclamations; reports about the heroics of ISIS fighters, accompanied by male faces, smiling, serious, or covered with scarves; condemnations of the movement's enemies, identified in religious terms pertaining to non-Muslims or Muslims declared to be wayward; appeals to readers to join the movement; and, since issue 7 (January-February 2015), a section especially for women. Matching the videos the group is known for posting on the internet, the magazine sometimes highlights gruesome images of dead bodies, whether of its own 'martyrs' or of enemies.

The magazine has a glossy quality, including frequent artful deployment of the distinctive images on the flag I have

# Islam and the Politics of Temporality: The Case of ISIS

Written by Shahzad Bashir

discussed above. The writing is generally simple and declarative, with little pretence towards analysis. It does, nevertheless, have a highly cultivated quality so that the writers' own speech appears very much the way Quran and hadith reports usually sound in English. This presumably carries to versions of the magazine in other languages too, although I do not have access to such texts to provide a concrete judgment. Overall, the magazine's text has an archaising tone that matches the affect of the movement's electronic messaging and its flag.

The magazine's first issue states that its name is 'taken from the area named Dabiq in the northern countryside of Halab (Aleppo) in Sham. This place was mentioned in a hadith describing some of the events of the Malahim (what is sometimes referred to as Armageddon in English). One of the greatest battles between the Muslims and the crusaders will take place near Dabiq' (p. 4). The explanation is interesting in terms of the movement's ordering of time: the name is anchored in an expected future justified through a past that has been flattened into a perennially existing binary between self and other. This is, I would suggest, a past constructed in the image of the future rather than the other way around. The religious battle presaged here carries the flavour of a coming apocalypse in the material sphere. This sense is confirmed in the magazine's second issue (Ramadan 1435/July 2014), whose cover carries the partial image of a large wooden boat accompanied by the statement 'It's either the Islamic State or the Flood'. The larger story connected to this pronouncement (pp. 5-7) portrays the group as the world's last potential saviour prior to the advent of the kind of divine punishment that is associated with Noah in biblical/Quranic accounts. The pattern of thematising the future through reference to iconic events placed in the past pertains to all the issues that have appeared to date.

The magazine's overall coverage of topics as well as the tone of the writing indicate what I would call a profoundly 'presentist' orientation. That is, categories and concerns of the movement's situation in the immediate present stand behind all its projections regarding the past. Given this attribute, it seems quite irrelevant to use terms such as 'modern' and 'medieval' to describe the group. The most detailed treatments are devoted to stories picked up from news media, and the movement's writers seemingly scour the internet for reports and commentary about themselves. Even when engaging matters beyond present interest, the magazine's primary drive is towards proselytization aimed at immediate recruitment. For example, in issue number 10 (July 2015), an article published under the heading 'From the Pages of History' is ostensibly concerned with showing that the month of Ramadan is an auspicious time for military action. This is argued through brief, decontextualised presentations of Muhammad's warfare as reported in selected early Islamic sources, followed by direct address to the reader to take up arms in support of ISIS. The story is accompanied by two three-quarter page photographs showing men with faces covered or barely visible, riding horses with swords in hand (26-28). These are all clearly theatricalised performances that are projecting an eternalised past usable for the immediate present.

In recent media coverage of ISIS, Graeme Wood's article 'What ISIS Really Wants' in the 25 March 2015 issue of *Atlantic Monthly* has received considerable attention. Observing ISIS self-proclamations, Wood suggests that we take the movement seriously as an apocalyptic group that derives its programme from a 'medieval' Islam that can be tracked in literary sources. He is critical of those who argue that ISIS should be regarded as un-Islamic since the apocalyptic rhetoric has clear Islamic origins. Responding to Wood's position, critics such as Caner Dagli have argued that ISIS ideologues are manifestly ignorant of the complexities of Islamic religious history and literary sources. This should, in the view of such commentators, disqualify the movement from being taken seriously as an Islamic perspective. Both these understandings are premised on the presumption that the Islamic past is something 'out there' that can be uncovered well or badly on the basis of universally applicable criteria. Both judge ISIS actors by evaluating media performances as unmediated windows onto the beliefs of the movement's proponents.

Wood's perspective is overly simplistic. He interprets rhetoric as straightforward reality, reflecting a problem that has been pervasive in media coverage of ISIS (Doostdar 2014). He is beguiled by the supposedly self-evident logic of the apocalypticism articulated by ISIS and fails to see that such ideas are inseparable from the historical contexts of which they form a part. Messianism and apocalypticism have a long history in Islamic thought and their political appeal has waxed and waned based on circumstances. Such ideas should scarcely be seen as a supra-historical 'true' Islam that acts as the engine behind movements such as ISIS. Wood is surprised by the fact that supporters of ISIS spout age-old texts at the same time as they act in modern cosmopolitan ways. This observation makes eminent sense when seen in conjunction with the fact that the movement's presentist orientation drives its severely minimalist

# Islam and the Politics of Temporality: The Case of ISIS

Written by Shahzad Bashir

vision of the past. For ISIS, the past is a very short script, easily placed within an overwhelmingly larger concern with an immediate present in which technological innovation and deployment are entirely normative. The views of Dagli and other similar critics of Wood are, on the other hand, expressions of Islamic theology in competition with ISIS. Their purpose is to differentiate between right and wrong Islam, on the basis of self-consciously Islamic ideological and political commitments. Sidestepping both these perspectives, I have suggested that it is more analytically satisfying to excavate temporal features that are crucial to ISIS actions and propagandistic self-assertion.

## Conclusion

My attempt to understand ISIS is invested neither in channelling the movement nor in competing with it on the basis of alternative religious truth claims. ISIS's primary medium for self-expression (the internet), its all-pervasive symbol (the flag), and its most elaborate propaganda instrument (the magazine) share a host of features pertaining to temporality. Its intellectually sparse yet absolutist propaganda utilises its vision of the Islamic past as a weapon against its detractors, Muslim as well as non-Muslim. The movement's projections regarding the past are generated with attention to what works well in the context of communication over the internet. It has leveraged twenty-first century technology to create a shallow temporality in which its own purportedly eternal truth is pitted against the falsehood represented by all opponents. The movement has self-consciously created a visual brand, focused on the past, which is promulgated through wide circulation of the symbolism present on its flag. It manipulates the media (including, most prominently, Western news sources) seemingly with the aim of blurring the boundary between its global electronic presence and its control over specific territory in Iraq and Syria. The spatiotemporal collapse contained within this manoeuvre is of a piece with its severely impoverished understanding of the Islamic past and future. Both tactics serve the purpose of creating a political image whose potency is said to reside in its simplicity. I hope to have shown that the movement's minimalist outward appearance overlays a host of complexities pertaining to the contemporary political and media environment. To continue to understand the movement through surface readings of the logic presented in its rhetoric may be a case of aiding in its success as a player on the world stage.

I have attempted to show that temporality is fundamentally a political matter that can be analysed through attention to its deployment in rhetoric and material production. ISIS is not unique when it comes to the significance of temporality in the creation of political programmes. Expanding the field of vision beyond the movement, issues pertaining to the past have been a constant factor in Islamic thought from the seventh century to the present (Bashir, forthcoming). In the contemporary setting, the kind of analysis I have attempted can be extended to other contenders, wherever they may fall on the political spectrum. Whether categorised as progressive, liberal, modernist, feminist, traditionalist, Islamist, radical, or extremist, contemporary Muslim sociopolitical actors create particular visions of Islamic pasts serviceable for varying ends. This is so especially in cases where a movement wishes the future to be different from what it perceives as the present. Moreover, all temporalities are products of particular circumstances and none predetermines events and experiences that are yet to materialise. Whatever the wishes of proponents of ISIS and other movements, actual futures will follow new contingencies that will, in turn, generate their own versions of pasts and futures. Herein lies part of the special complexity of the topic at hand: while temporalities can be objectified for analytical purposes, all explanatory narratives we can produce will contain their own debts to temporal orders whether conscious or unconscious.

*\*This publication was made possible in part by a grant from Carnegie Corporation of New York. The statements made and views expressed are solely the responsibility of the author.*

## Notes

<sup>[1]</sup> The term medieval is commonly used also to refer to Islamic contexts coeval with the period identified as the European Middle Ages. Such usage presents its own set of conceptual problems that are beyond the scope of the present discussion.

<sup>[2]</sup> I have had no direct access to proponents of ISIS or the territory controlled by the group. The scope of my analysis here is limited to what ISIS itself has disseminated and what has been reported widely in news media.

<sup>[3]</sup>

# Islam and the Politics of Temporality: The Case of ISIS

Written by Shahzad Bashir

The Saudi state is itself a valuable case for thinking about Islamic temporalities. It involves a blending of imperatives pertaining to a dynastic polity, a modern nation-state, and hyperterritorial championing of 'Islamic' causes around the world (al-Rasheed, 2006; Lecroix, 2011). Examining the details of the issue can aid in getting beyond simplistic evocations of 'Wahhabism' that still proliferate in discussions of the Kingdom.

[4] The use of the seal image by ISIS recalls Walter Benjamin's famous 1936 essay on art in the age of its mechanical reproducibility (2002): '[T]echnology of reproduction detaches the reproduced object from the sphere of tradition. By replicating the work many times over, it substitutes a mass existence for a unique existence. And in permitting the reproduction to reach the recipient in his or her own situation, it actualises that which is reproduced' (104). While Benjamin's reference points were photography and film, the internet has further radicalised the issue. The electronic image is the central emblem of ISIS, available globally as an ideologically meaningful object without the need of an elaborate undergirding tradition.

## References

Ali, A. H. (2015) *Heretic: Why Islam Needs a Reformation Now*. New York: Harper.

Anonymous (2014) *Su'āl wa-jawāb fī s-sabī wa-r-riqāb*. Maktaba al-Himma, Dīwān al-Buḥūth wa-l-iftā'.

Bashir, S. (2014) 'On Islamic Time: Rethinking Chronology in the Historiography of Muslim Societies.' *History and Theory* 53 (4): 464-519.

Bashir, S. (forthcoming) 'The Many Spirits of the Islamic Past'. In: Cornell, V. and Lawrence, B. B. (eds) *The Wiley-Blackwell Companion to Islamic Spirituality*. Chichester, UK: Wiley-Blackwell.

Benjamin, W. (2002) 'The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility: Second Version.' In: Eiland, H., and Jennings M. W. (eds) *Walter Benjamin: Selected Writings Volume 3 1935-1938*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.

Bernbeck, R. (2010) 'Heritage Politics: Learning From Mullah Omar?' In: Boytner, R., Dodd, L. S., and Parker, B. (eds) *Controlling the Past: Owning the Future: The Political Uses of Archaeology in the Middle East*. Tucson: University of Arizona Press.

Bernhardsson, M. (2005) *Reclaiming a Plundered Past: Archaeology and Nation Building in Modern Iraq*. Austin: University of Texas Press.

Browsers, M. and Kurzman C. (eds) (2004) *An Islamic Reformation?* Lanham, Maryland: Lexington Books.

Cook, M. (2014) *Ancient Religions, Modern Politics: The Islamic Case in Comparative Perspective*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

*Dabiq*. Issues 1-10. Available online at: [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Dabiq\\_\(magazine\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Dabiq_(magazine))

Dagli, C. (2015) 'The Phony Islam of ISIS.' *The Atlantic*. Available online at: <http://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2015/02/what-muslims-really-want-isis-atlantic/386156/>

Devji, F. (2005) *Landscapes of the Jihad: Militancy, Morality, Modernity*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press.

Doostdar, A. (2014) 'How Not to Understand ISIS.' Available online at: <https://divinity.uchicago.edu/sightings/how-not-understand-isis-alireza-doostdar>

Elias, J. (2007) '(Un)making Idolatry: From Mecca to Bamiyan.' *Future Anterior: Journal of Historic Preservation* 4(2): 2-29.



# Islam and the Politics of Temporality: The Case of ISIS

Written by Shahzad Bashir

Fabian, J. (2014). *Time and the Other: How Anthropology Makes its Object*. Reprint Edition. New York: Columbia University Press.

Hobson, J. M. (2012) *The Eurocentric Conception of World Politics: Western International Theory, 1760-2010*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Hom, A. R. 'Hegemonic Metronome: The Ascendancy of Western Standard Time.' *Review of International Studies* 36(4): 1145-1170.

Hoy, D. C. (2009) *The Times of Our Lives: A Critical History of Temporality*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press.

Hutchings, K. (2008) *Time and World Politics: Thinking the Present*. Manchester: University of Manchester Press.

Inayatullah, N. and Blaney, D. (2004) *International Relations and the Problem of Difference*. New York and London: Routledge.

Jordheim, H. (2014) 'Introduction: Multiple Times and the Work of Synchronization.' *History and Theory* 53(4): 498-518.

Karp, I. et al. (eds) (2006) *Museum Frictions: Public Cultures/Global Transformations*. Durham: Duke University Press.

Lacroix, S. (2011) *Awakening Islam: The Politics of Religious Dissent in Contemporary Saudi Arabia*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press.

Mahmood, S. (2006) 'Secularism, Hermeneutics, Empire: The Politics of Islamic Reformation.' *Public Culture* 18(2): 323-347

Masuzawa, T. (2005) *The Invention of World Religions*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

McCants, W. et al. (2015) *How Does ISIS Approach Islamic Scripture (Parts 1-4)*. Markaz: Middle East Politics and Policy. Available online at: <http://www.brookings.edu/blogs/markaz/posts/2015/03/24-isis-approach-to-islamic-scripture-part-one-bunzel>

An-Naim, A. A. (1996) *Toward an Islamic Reformation: Civil Liberties, Human Rights, and International Law*. Syracuse: Syracuse University Press.

Newton-Smith, W. H. (1980) *The Structure of Time*. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul.

Poirson, T. and Oprisko, R. (eds) (2014) *Caliphates and Islamic Global Politics*. Bristol: E-International Relations.

Al-Rasheed, M. (2006) *Contesting the Saudi State: Islamic Voices from a New Generation*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Al-Rasheed, M., Kersten, C. and Shterin, M. (eds) (2012) *Demystifying the Caliphate: Historical Memory and Contemporary Contexts*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Sivan, E. (1985) *Radical Islam: Medieval Theology and Modern Politics*. New Haven: Yale University Press.

Symes, C. (2011) 'When We Talk About Modernity.' *American Historical Review* 116(3): 715-726.

Wood, G. (2015) 'What ISIS Really Wants.' Available online at: <http://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2015/03/what-isis-really-wants/384980/>