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Eschatology in the ISIS Narrative

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Abstract: Apocalyptic millenarianism, rooted in traditional Islamic eschatology, is at the very core of the self-proclaimed Islamic State's narrative and its claim to sovereignty and legitimacy. The millenarian narrative also represents a radical departure from the jihadist paradigm of al-Qa'ida and provides a major conceptual and theoretical challenge to al-Qa'ida's leadership of the global jihadist movement. Other combatant groups in the Syrian civil war, such as Jabhat al-Nusra and Hezbollah, make some limited use of millenarian symbols. This essay will reference these cases briefly, for the purposes of comparison and context. The primary goals are to analyze the Islamic State's challenge to al-Qa'ida, document the Islamic State's millenarian narrative, and to contextualize these millenarian outbursts.

Table of Contents

Introduction.....	1
The Context of the ISIS/al-Qa'ida Rivalry.....	2
Millenarianism.....	8
The Millenarianism of ISIS.....	11
Jabhat al-Nusra and Hezbollah.....	19
Social Theories of Millenarianism.....	21
Bibliography.....	24

Introduction

Apocalyptic millenarianism, rooted in traditional Islamic eschatology, is at the very core of the self-proclaimed Islamic State's narrative and its claim to sovereignty and legitimacy. The millenarian narrative also represents a radical departure from the jihadist paradigm of al-Qa'ida and provides a major conceptual and theoretical challenge to al-Qa'ida's leadership of the global jihadist movement. Other combatant groups in the Syrian civil war, such as Jabhat al-Nusra and Hezbollah, make some limited use of millenarian symbols. This essay will reference these cases briefly, for the purposes of comparison and context. The primary goals are to analyze the Islamic State (hereafter, ISIS) challenge to al-Qa'ida, document ISIS's millenarian narrative, and to contextualize these millenarian outbursts.

This essay will first discuss the origin and evolution of ISIS and contrast its jihadist theory with that of core al-Qa'ida. It will then examine millenarianism in general, outline the doctrinal basis of ISIS's millenarianism, and present the evidence that ISIS's leadership encourages millenarian belief. It will then show how ISIS-inspired social media users have picked up and promulgated millenarian themes, briefly describe the millenarian references made by Jabhat al-Nusra and Shi'i militants, and finally discuss the extent to which sociological theories can shed light on the explosion of millenarianism in the Syrian civil war.

The Context of the ISIS/al-Qa'ida Rivalry

The group that is now ISIS has had a long and complex relationship with al-Qa'ida. In its extensive propaganda, ISIS proudly claims Jordanian terrorist Abu Musab al-Zarqawi as its founding father. Zarqawi headed an insurgent group in Iraq that, in April 2004, pledged its loyalty to al-Qa'ida. By that time, Zarqawi's group was already responsible for several major attacks, including the bombing of the United Nations' headquarters in Baghdad. Zarqawi's group became al-Qa'ida in Iraq (AQI, also known as al-Qa'ida in Mesopotamia and al-Qa'ida in the Land of the Two Rivers, in reference to the Tigris and Euphrates).¹ Despite this public association with al-Qa'ida, Zarqawi remained aloof from the group's central leadership. He resisted attempts by Osama bin Laden and Ayman al-Zawahiri to rein in AQI's violence against Iraqi Shia and uncooperative Sunnis. The affiliation between Zarqawi's group and al-Qa'ida central was in large part a marriage of convenience, in that "bin Laden got an affiliate in the most important theater of jihad at a time when the al-Qa'ida core was weakened and on the run, and Zarqawi got al-Qa'ida's prestige and contacts to bolster his legitimacy."² These early rifts between al-Qa'ida central and its Iraqi affiliate previewed the open rivalry and, in Syria, open warfare between, al-Qa'ida and ISIS.

¹ Richard Barrett, "The Islamic State," *The Soufan Group*, November 2014. Accessed July 21, 2015, <http://soufangroup.com/wp-content/uploads/2014/10/TSG-The-Islamic-State-Nov14.pdf>

² Daniel L. Byman and Jennifer R. Williams, "ISIS vs. Al Qaeda: Jihadism's global civil war," *Brookings Institution*, February 24, 2014. Accessed July 29, 2015. <http://www.brookings.edu/research/articles/2015/02/24-byman-williams-isis-war-with-al-qaeda>

An American airstrike killed Zarqawi in June 2006. His successor, with the blessing of al-Qa'ida central, joined with other Iraqi Sunni insurgent groups in proclaiming the Islamic State of Iraq (ISI). The Sons of Iraq, or the Awakening Movement, drawn from Iraqi Sunni tribal groups alienated by AQI/ISI's tactics, severely weakened AQI/ISI after aligning with the American-led coalition forces in 2007.³ After the leaders of ISI and AQI were killed in the same raid in 2010, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi (Ibrahim Awwad Ibrahim Ali al Badri al Samarrai) became the leader of ISI and began rebuilding the organization. He expanded ISI's operations into Syria in 2013 and unilaterally declared a merger with the official al-Qa'ida affiliate in Syria, Jabhat al-Nusra, to create the transnational Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham (ISIS). Zawahiri backed al-Nusra's rejection of the merger, leading to violence between al-Nusra and ISIS and ultimately, in February 2014, to Zawahiri's disavowal of ISIS and the termination of an al-Qa'ida/ISIS affiliation.⁴

Since this divorce, and ISIS's brutal and meteoric rise, the two groups have vied for leadership of the jihadist movement, and in Syria at least the contest has taken the form of violent conflict. Broadly, ISIS and al-Qa'ida have the same goals: overthrowing "apostate" regimes in the Islamic world, establishing "true" Islamic governance, and rendering inert, at the least, Western influence. Though they share these aspirations, the two groups' strategies, tactics, and politico-religious narratives differ markedly from one another. Al-Qa'ida central has never attempted to hold territory or govern, though some

³ Farook Ahmed, "Backgrounder #23: Sons of Iraq and Awakening Forces," *Institute for the Study of War*, February 21, 2008. Accessed July 10, 2015, <http://understandingwar.org/sites/default/files/reports/Backgrounder%2023%20Sons%20of%20Iraq%20and%20Awakening%20Forces.pdf>

⁴ Byman and Williams, "ISIS vs. Al Qaeda."

local affiliates have behaved more in this fashion (e.g. al-Shabab in Somalia). Osama bin Laden anticipated a decades or centuries-long struggle to create the conditions under which the Caliphate could be reestablished. He preached the importance of fighting the “far enemy” of the West, especially the United States, and urged Muslims to overlook their internal differences and unite against the West.⁵ These points are made clear in bin Laden’s 1996 declaration of war on the United States:

If it is not possible to push back the enemy except by the collective movement of the Muslim people, then there is a duty on the Muslims to ignore the minor differences among themselves; the ill effect of ignoring these differences, at a given period of time, is much less than the ill effect of the occupation of the Muslims’ land by the main Kufr [infidel, i.e. the United States].⁶

ISIS, on the other hand, has built an expansionist pseudo-state and declared it to be the restoration of the “true” Caliphate, a return to what it considers the uncorrupted system of Sharia governance of early Islam. In contrast to al-Qa’ida’s focus on the far enemy, ISIS has long had a local focus, seeing Iraq and the Levant as the more important battlegrounds. Under this “near enemy” strategy, the primary targets of ISIS are the Syrian and Iraqi regimes, as well as any local group that rejects ISIS. An associated goal is the religious “purification” of the Muslim community. While bin Laden made pan-Islamic overtures, ISIS is vehemently and virulently anti-Shia and routinely pronounces

⁵ Faisal Devji, *Landscapes of the Jihad: Militancy, Morality, Modernity* (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 2005), 53.

⁶ Osama bin Laden, “Declaration of war against the Americans occupying the land of the two holy places (expel the infidels from the Arab Peninsula): a message from Usama bin Muhammad bin Laden to his Muslim brethren all over the world generally and in the Arab Peninsula specifically,” 1996, reprinted in *The Idler*, vol. 3, no. 165, p. 9. http://www.pbs.org/newshour/updates/military-july-dec96-fatwa_1996/ Quoted in Faisal Devji, *Landscapes of the Jihad: Militancy, Morality, Modernity* (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 2005), 53.

takfir (apostasy, which is punishable by death) on other Muslims. Al-Qa'ida central has long been unhappy about the intentional targeting of Muslims, with Zawahiri in 2005 criticizing "AQI's killing of Shia in private correspondence captured by U.S. forces (asking Zarqawi, "Why kill ordinary Shia considering that they are forgiven because of their ignorance?") and argu[ing] that this was a distraction from targeting the Americans."⁷ These takfiri and anti-Shia tendencies, already strong under Zarqawi, have only intensified throughout ISIS's evolution. Al-Baghdadi's instructions to sympathetic jihadists in Saudi Arabia in November 2014 illustrate the rough order of ISIS's priorities in terms of opponents: "deal with the *rafida* [Shia] first...then *al-Sulul* [Sunni supporters of the Saudi monarchy]...before the crusaders [the U.S.] and their bases."⁸ Apparently the Saudi operatives obeyed, as ISIS claimed responsibility for the suicide bombings of two Shia mosques in Saudi Arabia in May 2015, followed by an August 2015 bombing that killed 12 Sunni members of a Saudi special forces unit.⁹

Understanding the many differences between al-Qa'ida and ISIS is important for a number of reasons, not least because the struggle of these groups for supremacy will shape the future of the global jihadist movement. In this regard, ISIS's politico-religious narrative is crucial. This narrative is central to the group's propaganda and has been decisive in ensuring the continued flow of new fighters into ISIS's ranks. It rests on two

⁷ Byman and Williams, "ISIS vs. Al Qaeda."

⁸ Graeme Wood, "What ISIS Really Wants," *The Atlantic*, March 2015. Accessed April 3, 2015. <http://www.theatlantic.com/features/archive/2015/02/what-isis-really-wants/384980/>

⁹ Kareem Shaheen, "Islamic State claims suicide bombing at Saudi Arabian mosque," *The Guardian*, August 6, 2015. Accessed August 10, 2015. <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/aug/06/suicide-bomber-attacks-mosque-in-saudi-arabia>

closely interrelated pillars: the restoration of the Caliphate and apocalyptic millenarianism. Declaring the Caliphate was an exceptionally audacious move that drew intense criticism and derision from much of the Muslim world, including the violent jihadist movement. However, by declaring the reestablishment of the Caliphate, ISIS set itself apart from every other jihadist group, and it made a claim to sovereignty over the entire Muslim world. In theory, a legitimate Caliph would be owed the loyalty of all Muslims everywhere. This claim to sovereignty has found enough of an audience to sustain the momentum of the ISIS narrative and has helped attract tens of thousands of foreign fighters to Iraq and Syria.

Much has been written about ISIS's declaration of the Caliphate, but one aspect is often excluded from analysis: for ISIS, the Caliphate is part and parcel of a broader millenarian narrative. ISIS uses the narrative of the Caliphate as fulfillment of apocalyptic prophecies to claim cosmological significance. This narrative, perhaps more than anything else, is how ISIS has created a new jihadist paradigm and is the cornerstone of its conceptual and theoretical challenge to al-Qa'ida. To maintain the internal validity of the narrative, however, ISIS must continue to hold and preferably expand the territory under its control. The narrative is thus one of ISIS's greatest strengths, but it also creates a great potential vulnerability. ISIS, with its necessary attachment to territory, can be destroyed as an organization in a way that al-Qa'ida cannot be. Its lasting imprint on the jihadist movement will depend much on the effects and utility of its millenarian narrative:

Large-scale violence heightens the appeal of apocalyptic narratives, particularly in areas mentioned in the prophecies, and it creates the political vacuums in which armed groups can flourish...The Islamic State has demonstrated that a modern caliphate is possible, that doomsday pronouncements and extreme violence attract

bloodthirsty recruits, and that cutting out the hearts and minds of a population can subdue them faster than trying to win them over. This may not be Bin Laden's jihad, but it's a formula future jihadists will find hard to resist.¹⁰

The next section offers a brief explanation of millenarianism and an overview of Islamic eschatology, and is followed by documentation and analysis of ISIS's millenarianism.

¹⁰ William McCants, "How ISIL Out-Terrorized Bin Laden: Brutality and doomsday visions have made ISIL the world's most feared terrorist group," *Politico*, August 19, 2015. Accessed August 19, 2015. <http://www.politico.com/magazine/story/2015/08/isis-jihad-121525.html#.VdV5d0JViko>

Millenarianism

In the most restrictive sense, millenarianism or millennialism is belief in one particular narrative of the Christian eschatological tradition, based on Revelations 20:4-6: roughly that the Second Coming of Jesus will herald a just, thousand-year divine reign on earth before the Last Judgment.¹¹ More generally the term has come to describe a belief in a future where, at some point, life on earth will be fundamentally transformed and a new, more just age will commence. In this much broader sense, secular movements such as Communism and Nazism are examples of millenarianism. Most millenarian movements in the modern era have been non-violent, though some groups (and millenarian-inspired individuals) have perpetrated significant, and sometimes spectacular, acts of violence. Millenarian violence is sometimes directed inward, taking the form of purges or mass suicides (as with Jonestown), and sometimes outwardly, as with Aum Shinrikyo and its sarin gas attack on the Tokyo subway. Observers and theorists of millenarian movements, mostly in the field of sociology, have attempted to determine the conditions under which millenarian movements are more likely to become violent. These sociological theories have some utility in the analysis of the millenarian tendencies of Syrian and Iraqi combatant groups, as this essay will later attempt to demonstrate.

Scholarly literature and, especially, popular discussion of millenarianism face occasional complications of terminology. Terms overlap, are defined differently, are conflated, or are left undefined: millenarian, apocalyptic, eschatological, and messianic,

¹¹ Norman Cohn, *The Pursuit of the Millennium: Revolutionary Millenarians and Mystical Anarchists of the Middle Ages* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1969), xiii.

for example. In describing the millenarianism of ISIS, Norman Cohn's definition is useful. He conceives of millenarian movements as those that picture salvation as:

- (a) collective, in the sense that it is to be enjoyed by the faithful as a collectivity;
- (b) terrestrial, in the sense that it is to be realized on this earth and not in some other-worldly heaven;
- (c) imminent, in the sense that it is to come both soon and suddenly;
- (d) total, in the sense that it is utterly to transform life on earth, so that the new dispensation will be no mere improvement on the present but perfection itself;
- (e) miraculous, in the sense that it is to be accomplished by, or with the help of, supernatural agencies.¹²

This definition certainly describes the “traditional” Islamic eschatology, though the emphasis on the “imminence” of collective salvation has, of course, waxed and waned throughout Islamic history. With the possible exception of the “terrestrial” clause, depending on the particular interpretation of eschatological narratives, the millenarianisms of the Syrian civil war fit this definition rather neatly. Cohn's definition could be said to describe *apocalyptic* millenarian movements, in that it emphasizes the belief in salvation's imminent nature, coming “soon and suddenly.” This “imminent” quality is largely what distinguishes the millenarianism that ISIS exhibits from that of other jihadist groups, which is a more general and less pressing conceptualization of the end times.

A synopsis of traditional Islamic eschatologies and the role of millenarian movements in Islamic history is warranted here, though a detailed account is outside the scope of this paper. The bases of Islamic eschatology are provided, obviously, by a number of Qur'anic verses and a greater number of hadith (the “saying and deeds” of the

¹² Cohn, *The Pursuit of the Millennium*, xiii–xiv.

Prophet Mohammad, which are the secondary source of Islamic doctrinal authority after the Qur'an). Although several competing Islamic eschatological narratives exist, they are in agreement on basic points. Jesus, the penultimate prophet of Islam, will return to earth during "Malahim al-Kubra" (great battles) to lead a Muslim army against the forces of the Dajjal (the Antichrist, approximately). The Dajjal will be defeated in advance of the return of the Mahdi, the savior/messiah figure in Islamic eschatology who is expected to be of Mohammad's lineage. The Mahdi will rule over a perfectly just kingdom on earth for a number of years before Judgment Day and the end of worldly creation.

The nature of the Mahdi is an area of doctrinal and theological contention between Sunni and Shia Muslims. Moreover, the expectation of the Mahdi's appearance has continually reappeared in Islamic history. As Jean-Pierre Filiu notes, "The history of Islam is punctuated by revolutionary movements, which typically erupt at the instigation of a self-proclaimed mahdi or his avowed representatives."¹³ The most recent major Mahdist uprising resulted in the two-week long occupation of the Grand Mosque in Mecca in 1979. Upon the mosque's takeover by some two or three hundred members of the Ikhwan group, one of their leaders "proclaimed himself the awaited Mahdi."¹⁴

¹³ Jean-Pierre Filiu, *Apocalypse in Islam* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2011), xi.

¹⁴ Filiu, *Apocalypse*, 74.

The Millenarianism of ISIS

Now, with Cohn's definition and this general account of Islamic eschatology in mind, consider the millenarian narrative promulgated by ISIS fighters, supporters, and leaders. In regard to the events preceding the coming of the Mahdi, ISIS emphasizes one hadith in particular, which gives prominence to what is today a small village in the north of Syria: Dabiq. ISIS entitled its glossy flagship, English-language magazine "Dabiq" in explicit reference to this apocalyptic prophecy, and devoted its very first full spread to reproducing and explaining the Dabiq hadith. The anonymous authors write:

This place [Dabiq] 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. Abu Hurayrah reported that Allah's Messenger (sallallahu 'alayhi wa sallam) said [here follows the hadith], "The Hour will not be established until the Romans land at al-A'maq or Dabiq (two places near each other in the northern countryside of Halab [Aleppo]. Then an army from al-Madinah of the best people on the earth at that time will leave for them...[and] will fight them. Then one third of them will flee; Allah will never forgive them. One third will be killed; they will be the best martyrs with Allah. And one third will conquer them; they will never be afflicted with fitnah. Then they will conquer Constantinople."¹⁵

ISIS supporters variously interpret "Rome" to mean modern Turkey, the United States, or the West/Christendom writ large. The hadith goes on to describe how Shaytan (Satan) will trick the Muslim army and lead them into a trap. 'Isa ibn Maryam (Jesus) then returns to earth to lead the Muslims, and he defeats Satan (in the form of the Dajjal). As a

¹⁵ Anonymous, "Dabiq Magazine," *Dabiq: The Return of the Khilafah*, issue 1, July 2014, 3–4. Accessed April 2, 2015, <http://www.clarionproject.org/news/islamic-state-isis-isil-propaganda-magazine-dabiq>

later issue of Dabiq magazine makes clear, “This battle ends the era of the Roman Christians, as the Muslims will then advance upon Constantinople and thereafter Rome, to conquer the two cities and raise the flag of the Khilafah [Caliphate] over them.”¹⁶ To make this apocalyptic point abundantly clear, the cover of the fourth issue of Dabiq magazine features an image of ISIS’s caliphal flag flying over St. Peters Square in Rome. All of these events are supposed to precede the coming of the Mahdi and his just, earthly reign before Judgment Day.

Apart from the particular prophetic narrative of Dabiq, ISIS’s magazine makes frequent millenarian references to “the Hour,” i.e. Judgment Day. For example, the fourth issue, published in October 2014, includes a lengthy article justifying the enslavement of members of Iraq’s Yazidi minority. It is entitled, “The Revival of Slavery before the Hour.”¹⁷ The anonymous authors point out, “As we approach al-Malhamah al-Kubra (the greatest battle before the Hour) – whenever its time comes by Allah’s decree – it is interesting to note that slavery has been mentioned as one of the signs of the Hour.”¹⁸ The authors of Dabiq magazine always display this cautious uncertainty about the timeframe of the Hour – “whenever its time comes” – to avoid the appearance they are presuming to know the divine plan, while at the same time pointing out signs and implying that ISIS is fulfilling prophecy.

¹⁶ Anonymous, “The Prophecies Regarding the Roman Crusaders,” *Dabiq: Issue 4, The Failed Crusade*, October 2014, 35. Accessed April 2, 2015,

<http://www.clarionproject.org/news/islamic-state-isis-isil-propaganda-magazine-dabiq>

¹⁷ Anonymous, “The Revival of Slavery before the Hour,” *Dabiq: Issue 4, The Failed Crusade*, October 2014, 14. Accessed April 2, 2015,

<http://www.clarionproject.org/news/islamic-state-isis-isil-propaganda-magazine-dabiq>

¹⁸ Anonymous, “The Revival of Slavery,” 15.

ISIS published the first issue of Dabiq magazine online in July 2014, shortly after its leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi declared the establishment of the “Caliphate” from a minbar (pulpit) in a Mosul mosque and became Caliph Ibrahim.. At that point, as the first issue of the magazine notes, ISIS did not control the Syrian village of Dabiq. In mid-August 2014, however, ISIS fighters waged an apparently brutal battle against other Syrian rebel groups, and ultimately wrested control of Dabiq from them.¹⁹ Its fighters “celebrated madly” on the occasion.²⁰ About a month later, ISIS repulsed an assault on Dabiq by rival rebel groups, apparently redirecting resources to Dabiq’s defense in the process.²¹ In strategic terms, Dabiq and its surrounds are generally considered to have little value to ISIS. A counterargument posits that ISIS control of the area moderately disrupts the resupply, through Turkey, of rival Syrian rebel groups in Aleppo Governorate. This does not seem especially likely, as Dabiq is the westernmost extent of ISIS control, and other rebel groups are dominant to the north, west, and south and control the major roadways leading from the Turkish border to Azaz and Aleppo.²²

In November 2014 ISIS released a video showing the simultaneous beheadings of 22 Syrian Army soldiers, followed by a statement by a masked executioner with the head of aid worker Peter (Abdul-Rahman) Kassig at his feet. ISIS apparently transported Kassig to Dabiq village to carry out the murder, and the alleged executioner tauntingly

¹⁹ Syria Direct, “News Update 8-14-2014: IS captures symbolic town in Aleppo,” *Syria Direct*, August 14, 2014. Accessed April 19, 2015. <http://syriadirect.org/news/syria-direct-news-update-8-14-2014/>

²⁰ Wood, “What ISIS Really Wants.”

²¹ Syria Direct, “News Update 9-11-14: Rebels, IS battle over Turkish border area,” *Syria Direct*, September 11, 2014. Accessed April 19, 2014. <http://syriadirect.org/news/syria-direct-news-update-9-11-14/>

²² “Syria: Mapping the Conflict,” *BBC News*, March 12, 2015. Accessed May 2, 2015. <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-22798391>

states to the camera, “Here we are, burying the first American crusader in Dabiq, eagerly waiting for the remainder of your armies to arrive.”²³

ISIS released an audiotape on 14 May 2015 with al-Baghdadi as the alleged speaker. In the tape, which is over a half-hour long and was released simultaneously with transcripts in several languages, Baghdadi says:

Our Prophet (peace be upon him) has informed us of the Malahim [battles] near the end of time. He gave us good tidings and promised us that we would be victorious in these battles. He is the truthful and trustworthy, peace be upon him. And here we are today seeing the signs of those Malahim and we feel the winds of victory within them...I commend the lions of the Caliphate...You are recording the Malahim and restoring the glories of Islam.²⁴

ISIS’s magazine (the name and content), its efforts to maintain control of Dabiq village, the Peter Abdul-Rahman Kassig video, and the ISIS audiotape cited above are all indications that top decision-makers in ISIS endorse and encourage a millenarian outlook. Their reasons for doing so, however, are less clear. ISIS’s invocation of this apocalyptic narrative is a claim that the group occupies a role of cosmic and transcendental significance, even beyond that of the establishment of the Caliphate. The leadership may simply see utility in the invocation of Dabiq for propaganda, morale, and recruitment purposes. They might also be true believers in the apocalyptic narrative and, if so, might make strategic decisions on that basis – as indeed they may have done with their efforts

²³ Wood, “What ISIS Really Wants.”

²⁴ Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi (alleged) “March Forth Whether Light or Heavy,” English transcript of audiotape, translated by anonymous ISIS members, May 14, 2014. Accessed May 14, 2015. <https://yolandaelvira.wordpress.com/2015/05/15/march-forth-whether-light-or-heavy/>

to take and hold Dabiq village. The evidence that might help resolve the question of ISIS leaders' convictions is scant.

The history of the organization's millenarian references date further back than the publication of ISIS's magazine. Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, the leader of ISIS's immediate precursor AQI, which after Zarqawi's death proclaimed the Islamic State of Iraq (ISI), stated in 2004, "The spark has been lit here in Iraq, and its heat will continue to intensify – by Allah's permission – until it burns the crusader armies in Dabiq."²⁵ This quote has been repeatedly reproduced in Dabiq magazine, often to exhibit the prescience of ISIS's founding father. After Zarqawi's death in 2006 and a subsequent leadership change in ISI, the group's leaders "saw signs of the end times everywhere. They were anticipating, within a year, the arrival of the Mahdi."²⁶ Graeme Wood, citing William McCants of the Brookings Institution (who is writing a book about ISIS's millenarianism), writes in the March 2015 issue of Atlantic magazine:

A prominent Islamist in Iraq approached bin Laden in 2008 to warn him that the group [ISI] was being led by millenarians who were "talking all the time about the Mahdi and making strategic decisions" based on when they thought the Mahdi was going to arrive. "Al-Qaeda had to write to [these leaders] to say 'Cut it out.'"²⁷

Indeed, according to McCants, ISI made a strategic misstep because of a Mahdist rationale:

Because of the impending Final Hour, Zarqawi's successor, Abu Ayyub al-Masri...establish[ed] the Islamic State [of Iraq] in 2006. Masri rushed to found

²⁵ Anonymous, "Dabiq Magazine," 2, as well as many other instances in Dabiq magazine.

²⁶ Wood, "What ISIS Really Wants."

²⁷ Wood, "What ISIS Really Wants," embedded quotes from Will McCants.

the State because he believed the Mahdi would come within the year. To his thinking, the caliphate needed to be in place to help the Mahdi fight the final battles of the apocalypse. Anticipating the imminent conquest of major Islamic cities as foretold in the prophecies, he ordered his commander in the field to conquer the whole of Iraq to prepare for the Mahdi's coming and was convinced they would succeed in three months. The Islamic State's forces fanned out across the country, only to be recalled a week later because they were spread too thin.²⁸

Whatever the beliefs of ISIS's current leadership regarding the Hour, the millenarian narrative of Dabiq seems to occupy a place of prominence in the minds of the organization's rank-and-file and its self-declared supporters around the world. ISIS-inspired Twitter feeds provide the most available and abundant evidence of this. There is a "Dabiq" hashtag; users repost images of an ISIS fighter carrying the black flag of the Caliphate with Dabiq village in the background; users cite a range of global events and debate their merits as fulfillments of apocalyptic prophecy.

One especially common activity of ISIS-inspired social media users is tracking the number of countries that have officially joined the coalition against ISIS, because of the content of another hadith regarding the Hour. This hadith, which has also been published in Dabiq magazine, states in part: "They [the Romans] will then gather for the Malhamah (the grand battle before the Hour). They will come for you under eighty banners, with each banner there will be twelve thousand people."²⁹ On the basis of this prophecy, ISIS supporters erupt in joy online every time the number of ISIS opponents increases towards the prophesized "eighty banners" (the coalition currently has over sixty members).

²⁸ William McCants, "How ISIL Out-Terrorized Bin Laden."

²⁹ Dabiq Magazine, "The Prophecies Regarding the Roman Crusaders," 33.

There another aspect of ISIS's millenarian tendencies worth noting. The eschatology of ISIS described thus far, as exhibited by the group's publications and its supporters, is doctrinally and theologically oriented, concerned as it is with appropriation and interpretation of prophetic tradition. However, ISIS's propaganda incorporates much more widely what might be termed "softer" millenarian tendencies – that is, millenarian elements that are more implicit, temporally oriented, and of less supernatural origin. These are elements more in line with the millenarianism of Communism or Nazism than that of Cohn's definition (see above).

For instance, the establishment of the Caliphate is depicted as ushering in a fundamentally new and more just era of Muslim existence and creating a clean break with the past. In the first issue of Dabiq magazine, immediately after the article that describes the significance of the Dabiq prophecy, there are several pages devoted to explaining and celebrating the Caliphate's establishment. The authors declare:

A new era has arrived of might and dignity for the Muslims. Amirul-Mu'minin [the "Commander of the Faithful," al-Baghdadi] said: "Soon, by Allah's permission, a day will come when the Muslim will walk everywhere as a master, having honor, being revered, with his head raised high and his dignity preserved. Anyone who dares to offend him will be disciplined, and any hand that reaches out to harm him will be cut off. *So let the world know that we are living today in a new era.*"³⁰ (Emphasis in original)

This less doctrinal millenarianism is also on display in the many exhortations on social media and in ISIS publications that the House of Saud will soon fall, that Jerusalem will soon be reconquered from the Zionists, and that the Crusaders will be

³⁰ Anonymous, "Khilafah Declared," *Dabiq Magazine: Issue 1, The Return of the Khilafah*, July 2014, 8. Accessed April 2, 2015. <http://www.clarionproject.org/news/islamic-state-isis-isil-propaganda-magazine-dabiq>

destroyed. This “softer” millenarianism permeates ISIS’s propaganda and the conversations of the group’s fans on the Internet. These non-doctrinal millenarian ideas run parallel to the Dabiq/Malahim millenarian narrative.

Jabhat al-Nusra and Hezbollah

As a combatant group in the Syrian civil war, ISIS is not alone in its millenarian outlook, at least in terms of propaganda. Al-Qaida's official affiliate in Syria, Jabhat al-Nusra, is a powerful rebel group that shares ISIS's origins. In fact, the leader of al-Nusra was once a top lieutenant of Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi in the organizational precursor to ISIS, the Islamic State of Iraq (ISI, or al-Qaida in Iraq, AQI). Baghdadi sent this lieutenant, Abu Muhammad al-Julani, to Syria in late 2011 to organize a jihadist rebel group. When ISI declared its entry into the war in Syria, and changed its name to ISIS, Baghdadi unilaterally announced the merger of ISIS and al-Nusra. Julani rejected the move, and was backed up by Ayman al-Zawahiri, thus sparking the enduring enmity between ISIS and al-Nusra/al-Qaida.

Perhaps in part as a function of al-Nusra's shared ancestry with ISIS, the group similarly utilizes Islamic millenarian symbols, though apparently to a much lesser extent and intensity. The most apparent example of this is the title of al-Nusra's media outlet: al-Manarah al-Bayda. Roughly, it translates to "the White Minaret" and is an explicit reference to an Islamic eschatological tradition (again, with a basis in the hadith). This tradition holds that when Jesus returns to fight the Dajjal, he will do so on the White Minaret of Damascus, which is widely interpreted to mean one of the minarets of the Ummayyad Mosque in the old city of Damascus.³¹ It seems that al-Nusra's invocation of this symbol is symbolic and rhetorical (in keeping with the group's affiliation with al-Qaida and its less apocalyptic form of millenarianism) but is noteworthy nonetheless.

³¹ Filiu, *Apocalypse*, ix.

Lastly, there are the millenarian beliefs rooted in the Shi'i tradition that some Hezbollah fighters, Syrian Alawis, and Iranian officials express. Hezbollah and Iran have been involved in the Syrian conflict from nearly its beginning in early 2011, in support of the Alawi-dominated Assad regime. Shi'i millenarianism in the modern era is a complex subject, and certainly was stirred by the 1979 Iranian Revolution. It is sufficient, here, to note that pro-regime militants in Syria's civil war have increasingly referenced Shi'i eschatological theology. According to a publication of the Washington Institute for Near East Policy:

The religious myth of Kitab al-Jafr has been revived as a means of explaining [the Syrian] conflict... According to Shiite interviewees, the conflict in Syria is linked to the reappearance of the Mahdi, which will precede the end of days. Hussein, a resident of Beirut's Shiite Dahiya neighborhood, explains, "The Jafr says that Assad will be killed during this war, and then the country will be ruled by a Sunni leader who will persecute Shiites." This state of injustice, according to the myth, will end when an army from the East intervenes and liberates Syria. This Eastern power is viewed by many believers in the narrative to be Iran.³²

Sales of Kitab al-Jafr and related texts, drawing on interpretations of prophetic traditions in the Qur'an and Shia hadith, as well as the mystical practice of *huruf*, have reportedly skyrocketed in recent years, and a number of YouTube videos allegedly show copies of Kitab al-Jafr recovered by Sunni fighters from Syrian battlefields.^{33,34}

³² Mona Alami, "Minding the Home Front: Hezbollah in Lebanon," *Washington Institute for Near East Peace*, August 2014. 6-7. Accessed April 14, 2015.

http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/uploads/Documents/pubs/ResearchNote21_Alami.pdf

³³ Nadine Elali, "A self-fulfilling prophecy," *Now News*, June 14, 2013. Accessed May 2, 2015. <https://now.mmedia.me/lb/en/reportsfeatures/a-self-fulfilling-prophecy>

³⁴ See, for example: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jUOKzepVy4U>

Social Theories of Millenarianism

In Syria and Iraq, the overall picture is of a civil war in which the three most important blocs all make appeals to millenarian symbols. ISIS appears to have by far the most developed and widespread apocalyptic millenarian program, but is not unique in employing millenarianism. So, then, what are the sociopolitical forces that might explain this phenomenon? Scholars have long attempted to derive generalizable theories from the specifics of empirical cases, and have met with some success in developing typologies, “ideal types,” and theoretical bases for the understanding of millenarian movements. Most formal studies of millenarian movements, however, tend to focus on elements that are generally absent in the case of ISIS, such as interpersonal relationships between a charismatic leader and a relatively small cult of followers; the effects of defection from the cult; and the alienation of millenarian movements from the dynamics of the societies in which they exist. More significantly, millenarianism is almost always the *raison d’être* of the groups being studied, or at least is taken as such. ISIS, Hezbollah, and Jabhat al-Nusra do not exist solely because of or in service to millenarian ideals. Rather, they have each incorporated, to varying degrees, preexisting millenarian narratives into their respective programs. Despite these limitations, the existing literature remains useful in attempting to understand the millenarianism of ISIS.

In developing a rough typology of the sources of violence in millenarian movements, John Walliss draws on “symbolic interactionism” and cites M. Barkun to categorize one source of millenarian violence:³⁵

Each side claims to have knowledge of the other, yet this knowledge is not derived from the other but from one’s own concept of the word. To the extent that the other is demonized – to millenarians, the state is evil, and to the state, millenarians are crazed – there is little incentive to see the word from the other’s point of view. What is looked for instead is evidence that confirms the picture already held. To the extent that the two sides interact on the basis of these mirror-image scripts, each will selectively identify and interpret evidence that fits into the appropriate script.³⁶

If one substitutes “the West” or “the media” for the “state” and identifies ISIS as “the millenarians,” this statement seems descriptive. In a similar vein, Catherine Wessinger’s work suggests that “radical dualism and pessimistic views of humanity in [catastrophic millennialism] make it more predisposed to violence.”³⁷ ISIS’s extreme takfiri tendencies certainly suggest radical dualism.

Sylvia Thrupp writes that the origin of millenarian movements may be often found in “social structures...causing deprivation by blocking the entry of any particular group to new opportunity and reward...[or by] chronically embodying tension between

³⁵ John Walliss, “Millenarianism and Violence in the Contemporary World,” in *Expecting the End: Millennialism in Social and Historical Context*, ed. Kenneth G.C. Newport and Crawford Gribben (Waco: Baylor University Press, 2006), 34.

³⁶ M. Barkun, “Introduction: Understanding Millennialism,” *Terrorism and Political Violence* 7, no. 3 (1995): 6.

³⁷ Catherine Wessinger. *How the Millennium Comes Violently: From Jonestown to Heaven’s Gate* (New York: Seven Bridges Press, 2000), 15.

the formally authorized leaders and a set of rivals.”³⁸ This formulation seems most wholly descriptive of ISIS’s context, given that its membership is drawn heavily from dispossessed Sunnis in Syria and Iraq, as well as foreign fighters alienated from their home societies.

Ultimately, the primary conundrum of applying theories or typologies of millenarian violence to these particular cases is that in Syria and Iraq immense violence and chaos preceded the widespread expressions of millenarianism. Whereas the social theories outlined above, as well as their empirical bases, illustrate a causal movement from millenarianism to violence under various conditions, for the cases detailed in this essay the relationship is more likely the inverse. The extreme trauma and violence present in Syria and Iraq created conditions in which millenarianism was primed to flourish. Political and religious entrepreneurs employed preexisting millenarian doctrines, and evoked more general millenarian themes, as mobilizing principles for their respective movements. For now it is impossible to know, and indeed is largely irrelevant, whether these leaders are true believers in millenarian narratives or if they have employed them cynically for propaganda purposes and to aid in the attempt to justify extreme violence. The social and humanitarian catastrophe of contemporary Syria and Iraq has been the midwife in the resurgence of active apocalypticism in the Islamic, and especially jihadist, world.

³⁸ Sylvia Thrupp, “A Report on the Conference Discussion,” in *Millennial Dreams in Action: Studies in Revolutionary Religious Movements*, ed. Sylvia L. Thrupp (New York: Schocken Books, 1970), 27.

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