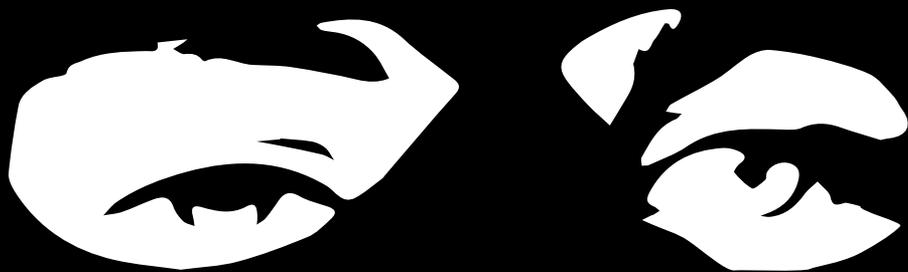
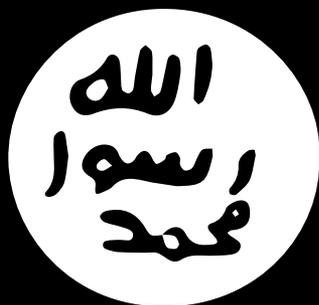


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THE

 ISLAMIC STATE

WHAT YOU NEED TO KNOW



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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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WHAT YOU NEED TO KNOW

JAMES C DENISON, PH.D

THE ISLAMIC STATE

“We will conquer your Rome, break your crosses, and enslave your women. If we do not reach that time, then our children and grandchildren will reach it, and they will sell your sons as slaves at the slave market.”

--Islamic State Spokesman Sheikh Abu Muhammad al-Adnani

WHAT YOU NEED TO KNOW

Imagine walking down the street when an Islamic State terrorist attacks you. Not because you are a threat to him or his group, but because he wants to behead you in a random “demonstration killing” he will put on YouTube for the world to see. In the fall of 2014, Australian police thwarted just such a plot, raiding more than a dozen properties and detaining 15 people.

Is this an isolated threat? According to New York City Police Commissioner Bill Bratton, the Islamic State has targeted his city by calling on American Muslims to perpetrate “lone wolf” assaults in Times Square. Attacks have been threatened in France, Canada, and Australia as well. The Charlie Hebdo shooting in Paris highlights the difficulty of stopping such “home grown” terrorists.

The “War On Terror” began after 9/11. From 2001 to 2014, spending on Overseas Contingency Operations to fund wars in Iraq and Afghanistan totaled \$1.492 trillion. During the war in Iraq, 4,488 U.S. soldiers were killed and 32,226 were wounded. For years, al-Qaeda was seen as our primary threat and Osama bin Laden as our chief enemy. In just a few weeks last year, a group calling itself the Islamic State captured world headlines, superseding our longtime adversary and becoming the most powerful terrorist group in the world.

They make news nearly daily with horrific executions, staging mass beheadings and burning victims alive. They have slaughtered more than 5,000 victims since beginning their campaign of terror. Captured women have been sold as sex slaves by the hundreds. Women and children who refused to convert to their version of Islam have been buried alive. The group recently burned the library at Mosul, including 8,000 rare books and manuscripts. Now they claim that they will assault “Rome” (interpreted variously as Turkey, Italy, or American and Western armies) and call for followers to attack Westerners in malls and wherever else they can murder us.

What is the Islamic State? What does it want? Why does it commit such atrocities? Is it a threat to the West? What can be done to stop it?

WHAT SHOULD WE CALL THIS ENEMY?

The Islamic State is different from any enemy America has confronted in her history. Like al-Qaeda and other jihadist groups, it is not fighting a conventional war for conventional reasons. Its goals are ideological and spiritual. It seeks nothing less than the imposition of its version of Islam on the entire world. But unlike any other jihadist group, it claims to have established a Muslim caliphate and to follow a “caliph.” As we will see, this claim explains much of its growth and global impact.

In its current form, the organization now describing itself as the “Islamic State” is known by at least five different terms.

- Its Arabic name is transliterated as ad-Dawlah al-Islamiyah fi al-Iraq wash-Sham. This name leads to the Arabic acronym Da’ish or DAESH.
- The group’s Arabic name translates in English to “The Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham,” or ISIS.
- “Al-Sham” is another name for Syria, so that the organization is sometimes called “The Islamic State of Iraq and Syria,” with the same acronym.
- Since “Levant” is an academic term for the larger Middle East, some call the group “The Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant,” or ISIL.
- On June 29, 2014, it proclaimed itself a Worldwide Caliphate (to be explained below), and renamed itself “The Islamic State,” or IS.

In May 2014, the U.S. government announced that it would refer to the organization as ISIL. However, many Arab groups reject the group’s claim to be an Islamic state of any kind, and so prefer the acronym DAESH. Many U.S. officials now use this name, though IS rejects it and flogs those who use it. Since the group’s reach has outgrown Iraq, Syria, and the Levant, I will call it what it calls itself—the Islamic State (IS).

WHAT IS ITS HISTORY?

The Islamic State began operations in 1999 as a jihadist group in Iraq, calling itself “The Organization of Monotheism and Jihad.” Composed of Sunni extremists (I will explain “Sunni” and “Shiite” below), its founder was Abu Musab al-Zarqawi. He swore allegiance to Osama bin Laden and merged his group with al-Qaeda in October 2004. Al-Zarqawi was killed in a U.S. air strike in 2006 and succeeded by Abu Omar al-Baghdadi. Later that year, the group merged with other factions to form the Islamic State of Iraq (ISI).

After Abu Omar al-Baghdadi was killed in an air strike in 2010, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi was elected by a Shura council (religious assembly) in Nineveh to succeed him. When civil war unfolded in Syria two years later, al-Baghdadi sent fighters there and added “al-Sham” (Syria) to his group, now known as ISIS. After refusing demands to withdraw from Syria by Ayman al-Zawahiri, the leader of al-Qaeda, his group broke from al-Qaeda in early 2014.

On June 9, 2014, ISIS fighters seized Mosul, the second-largest city in Iraq. Two days later it took control of Tikrit. It has continued expanding its territory, and now controls land the size of Great Britain or the state of Indiana. On June 29, al-Baghdadi announced that the lands he controlled in Iraq and Syria were part of the “Islamic State,” and that he was its “caliph,” or leader. (More on the “caliph” follows.) In July, the group seized control of Syria’s largest oil field and has captured others since.

Its followers in Syria have been seizing territory from other rebel groups. In Iraq, al-Baghdadi has successfully unified opposition to the Shiite government as former officers of Saddam Hussein’s Baath Party and other tribal militias have joined his coalition. They are committed to destroying Iraqi security forces and killing their Shiite enemies.

IS now controls more than \$2 billion in assets, and receives \$1.3 million a day from oil revenues. It has mounted the most sophisticated social media strategy of any extremist group in history. Estimates of its active fighter forces range from 20,000 to 31,500, and are expanding daily. More than a thousand Westerners have joined, including more than 100 Americans; all would have Western passports.

According to Thomas Friedman, today’s Islamic State is made up of three loose factions. One comprises foreign volunteers—some are hardened jihadists, but many are misfits and adventure seekers. A second comprises the group’s backbone—former Sunni Baathist army officers and local Iraqi Sunnis and tribes giving IS passive support. They are united in their hatred for the Shiites who oppressed them under Iraq’s previous Shiite-led government. A third faction is composed of true ideologues such as al-Baghdadi, with their own apocalyptic version of Islam.

Al-Baghdadi’s followers believe he has established the only righteous government on earth. It collects taxes, regulates prices, operates courts, and provides health care, education, and media. It is also reproducing the norms of early Islam: slavery, crucifixion, and beheadings.

Militants are carrying the IS flag in Indonesia and across North Africa. It is establishing military affiliates in Afghanistan, Algeria, and Egypt as well as

Libya. Boko Haram, a Nigeria-based jihadist group, recently pledged allegiance to IS. Extremists are also pledging loyalty to IS in Jordan, Lebanon, Saudi Arabia, Tunisia, and Yemen. In the minds of many observers, IS is the most significant threat the West has faced since 9/11.

WHO IS ABU BAKR AL-BAGHDADI?

The leader of IS is the most-wanted terrorist in the world, with a \$10 million bounty on his head. He was born Awwad Ibrahim Ali al-Badri al-Samarra and grew up in Samarra, part of the Sunni region north of Baghdad. He received undergraduate, Masters, and Ph.D. degrees from the Islamic University in Baghdad.

There he changed his last name to al-Baghdadi. When he became a cleric, he took for his first name Abu Bakr, the prophet Muhammad's father-in-law, chief advisor, and successor. He claims to be a direct descendant of Muhammad.

For more than a decade, al-Baghdadi lived in a room attached to a small mosque on the western edge of the city. He was known as a shy religious scholar who eschewed violence, and for his skill as the best player on his mosque's soccer team.

A teacher of Salafi (very conservative) Islam, al-Baghdadi focused his doctoral work on sharia (Islamic law). After finishing his Ph.D., he married and became a father a year later. His son is now 11 or 12 years old.

Al-Baghdadi's conversion to jihadist terrorism is still something of a mystery. While he was a member of al-Qaeda in Iraq, eyewitnesses say he did not participate in its violent uprising against the U.S. invasion of Iraq in 2003. However, in 2005 he was imprisoned by American forces in Camp Bucca when intelligence reports claimed that he had been fighting against the U.S. occupation. He kept such a low profile that he was released when the prison shut down in 2009. His parting comment, "I'll see you guys in New York," was not taken as a threat by the guards.

However, observers believe that al-Baghdadi was radicalized in prison by al-Qaeda jihadists he met there. When he was released, he reaffirmed his membership in al-Qaeda of Iraq. In 2010, the group's leader was killed in a U.S. air strike. Surprisingly, al-Baghdadi was elected to succeed him and lead al-Qaeda's Islamic State of Iraq. As noted, he broke from al-Qaeda in 2014.

WHO WAS THE PROPHET MUHAMMAD?

The Islamic State is composed of Sunni Muslims who are committed to an extremist vision of global domination. To understand their convictions, we need to take a very short course in Islam and jihadism. (For much more on Islam, its history and its beliefs, see my *Radical Islam: What You Need to Know*.)

“Islam” means “peace” or “submission.” The religion, followed by 1.7 billion adherents around the world, begins with the Prophet Muhammad. Born in AD 570 in the Arabian city of Mecca, Muhammad ibn Abdallah grew to become a successful businessman in his community. Each year during the month of Ramadan (the ninth month on the Arab calendar), he would retreat to a nearby mountain called Mount Hira for contemplation and prayer.

On the 17th day of Ramadan in the year A.D. 610, he was gripped by an experience Muslims call “the Night of Power and Excellence.” They believe that Muhammad was met by the angel Gabriel, and received the first in a series of revelations that became the Qur’an (“the Reading”). For the next twelve years, he shared these “revelations” with his family, friends, and community in Mecca. They centered in the assertion that there is only one God, and offered a conciliatory tone toward those who disagreed:

“Let there be no compulsion in religion” (2:256).

“To you be your Way, and to me mine” (109:6).

By 622, however, such opposition had arisen that Muhammad and his seventy followers fled from Mecca 250 miles north to the town of Yathrib, renamed Medina (“the city” or “the city of the Prophet”). There he established the first global Muslim community (known as the “ummah”). And there his “revelations” took on a more militant tone, calling Muslims to defend Islam from all attackers:

“Fight in the cause of God those who fight you, but do not transgress limits; for God loveth not transgressors. But if they cease, God is Oft-Forgiving, Most Merciful” (2:190, 192).

Toward the end of his life, Muhammad’s preaching became even more militaristic, now calling on Muslims to initiate aggression against non-Muslims:

“Fight and slay the pagans wherever ye find them. . . . Fight those who believe not in God” (9:5, 29).

Many Muslims believe that these later pronouncements (often called “sword verses”) should be interpreted in light of the earlier, more conciliatory revelations. They view calls to initiate violence in the same way Christians and

Jews view God’s commands to kill the Canaanites—essential in that formative period of Jewish history, but not precepts for us today.

However, jihadists believe just the opposite. Following the doctrine of “abrogation,” they claim that the later the revelation, the more authoritative it is. To them, killing infidels (non-Muslims) and apostates (former Muslims) is a duty required by their religion.

WHO ARE “SUNNI” AND “SHIITE”?

“Sunni” and “Shiite” are the two main branches of Islam. “Sunni” is most likely a derivation of “Sunnah” (“the way”), showing that Sunnis follow the example or path of Muhammad. “Shiite” means “followers,” and refers to disciples of Ali (explained below).

Their differences originated in a dispute over leadership of the Muslim world. Muhammad did not appoint a successor before his death in AD 632. Sunni Muslims believe that the “caliphs” (“successors”) of Muhammad have been the rightful heirs of the prophet and leaders of Islam.

These heirs ruled continuously in the Arab world until the breakup of the Ottoman Empire after World War I. Sunnis view the destruction of the caliphate by Mustafa Kemal Atatürk in 1923 as catastrophic (roughly analogous to abolishing the papacy for Catholics). We will return to the “caliphate” below.

Shiites, by contrast, claim that only the heirs of the fourth caliph, Ali, are the legitimate successors of Muhammad. They refer to these heirs not as “caliphs” but as “imams.” Most of them believe that the Twelfth Imam disappeared in A.D. 931 but will appear again at the end of history to dominate the world for Islam. They call him the Mahdi (the “rightly-guided one”).

Sunni Muslims comprise some 85 percent of the Muslim world. Shiites, some 15 percent of Islam, live primarily in Iran, Iraq, and parts of Syria and Yemen.

WHAT DO ALL MUSLIMS BELIEVE?

Muslim beliefs can be summarized by the “five pillars of Islam.”

ONE: The “witness.” Muslims the world over affirm that “there is no God but God, and Muhammad is his prophet.” This creed is their central statement of faith. Stating it slowly and reverently in the presence of two witnesses makes one a Muslim. Many Muslims make it the first and last words they speak during the day and want it to be their dying words as well.

TWO: Daily prayers. Observant Muslims pray five times each day, facing toward Mecca.

THREE: Pilgrimage to Mecca. Known as the “hajj,” this is required of every Muslim. Those who cannot make the journey are expected to pay for someone to go in their place.

FOUR: Fasting during Ramadan. From sunup to sundown, observant Muslims are not permitted to swallow. After sunset, they can eat as they wish.

FIVE: Alms-giving. All Muslims are expected to contribute at least 2.5 percent of their goods to the poor.

WHAT DO RADICAL MUSLIMS BELIEVE?

Why did the 9/11 terrorists attack America? Why are radical Muslims such as Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi committing such atrocities in the name of Islam? Because they hold two tenets in addition to the “five pillars.”

ONE: They believe that the West has been attacking the Muslim world since the Crusades. Remember that Muhammad established the “ummah,” the global Muslim community, at Medina in AD 622. From that time to this, Muslims believe that all followers of Islam across all time are part of this community. Any act against any Muslim is an act against all Islam.

As a result, the Crusades are still remembered by radical Muslims and retribution is sought. In their minds, Western troops stationed on Saudi soil during the first Gulf War and later in Iraq and Afghanistan also constitute aggression against Islam.

They believe (as do most Muslims) that the Jews are not God’s chosen people, claiming that Abraham offered Ishmael rather than Isaac to God. As a result, they see the creation of Israel in 1948 as a theft of land from its rightful Palestinian owners, and view American support for Israel is an act of violence against the Palestinians and thus the Muslim world. Since they believe the Qur’an requires retribution against enemies of Islam, they consider such violence to be God’s command.

TWO: They claim that there are no innocent victims in the West. This tenet most distinguishes radical Muslims from the larger world. Since America and Western countries are democracies in which we elect our leaders and support our military, jihadists view us as we viewed Germans who supported Hitler or Japanese citizens who supported the emperor in World War II.

To radical Muslims, 9/11 was not an unprovoked attack on innocent Americans. On the contrary, they view it as a defense of Islam required by the Qur'an, striking at the heart of "Crusader," imperialist America—the Twin Towers representing the financial, the Pentagon the military, and the White House (the presumed target of the jet that crashed in Pennsylvania) the political. To them, killing any American or Westerner is an act that defends Islam and obeys the Qur'an.

How many Muslims accept these two tenets of radical Islam? According to Gallup polls, approximately seven percent of the Muslim world. This finding does not mean that seven percent of Muslims living in America are radicalized. The percentage would be much lower in the U.S., but much higher in Yemen or Pakistan.

While seven percent does not seem frightening, remember that there are 1.7 billion Muslims in the world. Seven percent of their number represents 119 million radical Muslims, a fighting force three times larger than the enemies we faced in World War II and the Cold War, combined.

And half of the radicalized Muslim world told Gallup they would be willing to die in defense of Islam, a finding that equates to nearly 60 million potential suicide bombers. Even if that number is ten times too high, there would still be six million suicide bombers willing to die by killing citizens in the West.

WHAT DOES IS BELIEVE?

Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi and his followers are fully committed to the tenets of radical Islam. In addition, on June 29, 2014, al-Baghdadi announced that his group had established a caliphate, and that he was now the successor of Muhammad and caliph, global leader of Islam. His group demands that all Muslims accept him as their head.

Its ideology

IS is following the strategy set out by Sayyid Qutb, known as the "intellectual godfather" of radical Islam. His book, *Milestones*, is the primer that helped lead Osama bin Laden into terrorism and influenced al-Baghdadi as well.

Qutb argued that every person on earth deserves a chance to become a Muslim. However, he believed that this opportunity exists only if the person lives in a nation that is truly Islamic, one governed solely by sharia. Thus Muslims must topple every government and impose strict sharia on every civilization. Only then can people see true Islam and have an opportunity to choose it. IS intends to fulfill this vision, in Iraq and Syria, the U.S., and the entire world.

Its theology can be summarized by these verses from the Qur'an:

- Doctrine of abrogation: "Whatever communications we abrogate or cause to be forgotten, we bring one better than it or like it" (2:106).
- Christians and "moderate" Muslims are to be attacked: "Strive hard against the unbelievers and the hypocrites and be unyielding to them; their abode is hell, and evil is the destination" (9:73).
- Christians are to be conquered: "Fight those who believe not in Allah . . . even if they are of the People of the Book, until they pay the Jizyah with willing submission, and feel themselves subdued" (9:29).
- Unbelievers who will not repent are to be killed: "Slay the idolaters wherever you find them, and take them captive and besiege them and lie in wait for them in every ambush, then if they repent and keep up prayer and pay the poor-rate, leave their way free to them" (9:5).
- How to punish enemies: "The punishment of those who wage war against Allah and His messenger and strive to make mischief in the land is only this, that they should be murdered or crucified or their hands and their feet should be cut off on opposite sides or they should be imprisoned; this shall be as a disgrace for them in this world, and in the hereafter they shall have a grievous chastisement" (5:33).
- Women captives can be raped: "All married women are forbidden unto you save those captives whom your right hands possess. It is a decree of Allah for you" (4:24).
- Those who die in jihad are guaranteed paradise: "Allah hath purchased of the believers their persons and their goods; for theirs in return is the garden of Paradise: they fight in His cause, and slay and are slain: a promise binding on Him in truth . . . then rejoice in the bargain which ye have concluded: that is the achievement supreme" (9:111).

Its motives

In our eyes, IS is simply a band of murderous thugs, perverting Islam and using it for their own nefarious ends. But such a reading misses the group's own beliefs and intentions. As Graeme Wood notes in his excellent analysis, "Much of what the group does looks nonsensical except in light of a sincere, carefully considered commitment to returning civilization to a seventh-century legal environment, and ultimately to bringing about the apocalypse."

When IS crucifies, beheads, or burns alive its victims, it is not merely committing atrocities to gain public notoriety. It is also following a strategy derived from seventh-century Islamic practices. During the first 100 years of Islam, its armies achieved domination of the Middle East and beyond in large part by following just these practices. Their “shock and awe” atrocities caused the larger populace to abandon resistance and submit to their rule.

IS is convinced that any Muslim who does not follow its strict legalism is not a true Muslim (this is known as the doctrine of takfiri). Such people must either convert or be killed as apostates. All 200 million Shiite are thus marked for death, as are most Sunni Muslims. IS intends to expand its acts of horrific barbarism, and to inspire terrorism by its followers around the world. Al-Baghdadi has demanded the toppling of Baghdad, then the inclusion of the Gulf and Jordan in his caliphate. He claims that his men will not stop until they reach “Rome.”

Its view of the future

And so we come to one other doctrine we must consider in understanding IS: its vision of the future. Muslims have very specific end-times expectations, as described by Islamic scholar David Liepert:

- The Euphrates River will uncover a mountain of gold, while the Arabian Peninsula fills with meadows and rivers.
- Some Muslims around the world will be transformed into apes and pigs because they try to make lawful some significant sins.
- The Mahdi will appear, uncover the Ark of the Covenant, and evangelize a significant portion of the world’s Jews.
- An anti-Messiah known as al-Masih ad-Dajjal will appear.
- Jesus will return and will defeat al-Dajjal.
- The sun will rise from the west.
- The Beast of the earth will appear.
- A wind will take the souls of the believers.
- Medina will be ruined.
- Mecca will be destroyed.
- Fire will come from Yemen to gather the people for the Judgment Day.

IS leaders apparently believe that they play a crucial role in these events. They claim that their caliph is the eighth of 12 that will appear before history ends. They expect to defeat the armies of “Rome” at the Syrian city of Dabiq. IS named its propaganda magazine after the town and awaits a great battle there.

Next, they expect to sack Istanbul in battle with ad-Dajjal. This enemy will succeed in destroying most of their forces, with just 5,000 remaining, cornered in Jerusalem. Then Jesus will return to earth, kill ad-Dajjal, and lead them to victory. They are convinced that their caliphate signals the “beginning of the end.” Muslims around the world who agree are joining their cause.

To summarize: IS believes it has reestablished the caliphate and is following the proper successor of Muhammad and leader of the global Muslim movement. It will continue its military expansion, driven by atrocities and fueled by social media and oil money, until it defeats its enemy, fights its anti-Messiah, and achieves global conquest.

WHAT IS THEIR APPEAL?

Tens of thousands of foreign Muslims are believed to have migrated to join the Islamic State. Recruits come from the U.S., France, the U.K., Belgium, Germany, Holland, Australia, and Indonesia among other places.

The Obama administration recently acknowledged the group’s expanding threat when it requested new congressional authority to pursue its members wherever they emerge, not just in Iraq and Syria. The group has advanced beyond al-Qaeda to become a global menace before our eyes.

What is the secret to its appeal in the Muslim world? Let’s begin with the wrong answer, then look at the real factors behind its growing popularity.

It is conventional wisdom in the West that Muslims become radicalized when they are not given access to Western-style material possessions, education, and democracy. For some, frustration with decades of decadent leadership and crushing poverty are undoubtedly contributing factors.

But ideologues such as al-Baghdadi and his followers are not seeking the benefits of Western culture. In fact, they reject the very materialism we think they want. They believe democracy to be heresy—as they often retort, why would they want the laws of men when they have the laws of God in the Qur’an? They reject Western-style education, choosing to indoctrinate their children in their version of sharia. They eschew material comforts on earth, believing that such deprivation makes them more likely to inherit the eternal pleasures of Paradise.

In light of IS's anti-Western agenda for global expansion, three factors explain its meteoric rise:

ONE: As noted, it declared the formation of a caliphate in June 2014. We cannot overstate the significance of this declaration for some in the Muslim world.

TWO: IS is using al-Qaeda's franchise structure to expand, but without the group's rigorous, multiyear application process. As a result, its franchises are growing faster, easier, and farther.

THREE: As one analyst notes, many in the Muslim world view IS as the "winning group." Its highly sophisticated social media and marketing strategies, coupled with expansive financial resources derived from territories it has conquered, position it on a global stage.

As CNN explains, IS plays on a recruit's sense of identity and religious duty. It uses media to desensitize children and attract recruits online. (The terrorist who beheaded Americans James Foley and Steven Sotloff spoke with a British accent, showing that Westerners can join IS.) Once they travel to join IS, they submit to the group's cult-like control.

DOES IS THREATEN THE WEST?

As noted, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi told his American captors in 2009, "I'll see you guys in New York." How should we take his words?

First, will Westerners who join IS and then return home be a threat? The FBI believes so, and is working to identify Americans fighting with IS and stop them from attacking citizens if they return to the U.S.

Officials worry that "homegrown" terrorists" will learn bomb-making and combat skills from IS and could then mount a major attack on the homeland. For example, al-Qaeda authorized a terrorist assault in 2009 to be carried out by three returning Americans, and gave the group's leader bomb-making materials he intended to use in attacking New York's subways. The plot was uncovered and the conspirators convicted.

A second threat concerns "lone wolf" terrorists who are trained for missions in the U.S. In May 2014, an American volunteer from Florida carried out a suicide attack in Syria on behalf of al-Qaeda's affiliate in that country. Days after the Paris attacks, U.S. authorities announced that they had arrested an Ohio man who claimed to be an IS supporter and planned to bomb the U.S. Capitol.

A third scenario involves groups trained by IS but entrusted to develop their own terrorist resources when they return home. As an example, remember the July 7, 2005, suicide bombings in London that killed 52 people and injured more than 700. At least one of the four suicide bombers received terrorist training in Pakistan, but no materials. British authorities are concerned that a number of fighters already returned from Syria and Iraq are planning similar attacks.

The fourth and most likely scenario involves individual attacks such as random shootings of civilians, and attacks on uniformed military personnel and their families. For example, IS recently identified 100 American soldiers and called upon its sympathizers to kill them. In addition, an Army National Guardsman and his cousin were recently arrested for planning to conspire with IS. One was plotting to attack a northern Illinois military facility, while the other attempted to fly to Cairo to wage violence on behalf of IS. IS encourages followers to use guns or even their vehicles as weapons against civilians.

In addition to sending or encouraging terrorists to attack Americans in the U.S., IS presents a mounting military threat to our allies in the Middle East. It intends to continue seizing land and destabilizing countries where its caliphate is located. It wants to topple every regime in a Muslim country, since none govern according to its version of sharia. Its presence in Libya could serve as a significant launching point for attacks in Italy and across southern Europe. Its growth would destabilize the global economy, directly affecting Americans.

House Intelligence Chairman Mike Rogers, R-Michigan, warns: “This is a problem that we will have to face and we’re either going to face it in New York City or we’re going to face it [in Iraq].” He explains: “These are sophisticated, command and controlled, seasoned combat veterans who understand the value of terrorism operations external to the region, meaning Europe and the United States. That is about as dangerous a recipe as you can put together.”

Retired Gen. Peter Chiarelli adds that “all Americans should be concerned” by IS’s rise to power. According to Sen. Lindsey Graham, “The seeds of 9/11s are being planted all over Iraq and Syria. They want an Islamic caliphate that runs through Syria and Iraq . . . and they plan to drive us out of the Mideast by attacking us here at home.”

WHAT CAN CHRISTIANS DO?

The growth of the Islamic State does not surprise our Lord. The psalmist declared that “God reigns over the nations; God sits on his holy throne” (Psalm 47:8). Note the present tense. No matter our circumstances, God is Lord over them.

Our sovereign Father redeems all he allows. How would he redeem the threat of IS? What does he want his people to do? A. J. Gordon noted: “You can do more than pray after you have prayed; but you can never do more than pray until you have prayed.” Consider three biblical calls to prayer.

FIRST, pray for those who are being victimized by IS.

In 2003, more than a million believers lived in Iraq. Since the U.S.-led invasion that year, at least half fled the country as Sunni Muslims attacked them and their churches. Now many believers are fleeing to Kurdistan and other more protected places. The fall of Mosul to IS was especially devastating. It is the most important city in Iraq to Christians and is said to be the burial site of the prophet Jonah.

Christians are people without a party in Iraq and face increased persecution wherever IS strikes. In February 2015, the group executed twenty-one Coptic Christians. That same month, it was reported that IS had kidnapped more than 100 Christians in Syria. Their reign of terror against God’s people continues. (For more on Christians facing persecution, I recommend missionary Tom Doyle’s excellent *Killing Christians: Living the Faith Where It’s Not Safe to Believe*.)

Scripture calls us to “remember those who are in prison, as though in prison with them” (Hebrews 13:3). Ask God to intervene on their behalf. Pray for their miraculous release and safety. Pray for outside forces to protect Christians and rescue victims. As God’s angel released Peter from Herod’s prison in answer to the church’s intercession (Acts 12:1-19), so his angels can protect his people today.

SECOND, pray for our leaders and encourage them to defend believers and stop IS.

God’s word commands us to “rescue the weak and needy; deliver them out of the hand of the wicked” (Psalm 82:4). When we are attacked, he calls us to “fight for your brothers, your sons, your daughters, your wives, and your houses” (Nehemiah 4:14).

God’s word also calls us to intercede for our leaders (1 Timothy 2:1-2). Pray for President Obama and other world leaders as they search for effective options in responding to IS. Pray for our soldiers in harm’s way, in the Middle East and around the world. And pray for their families at home, that they would be protected from terrorism and know the peace of God.

THIRD, pray for spiritual awakening to continue in the Muslim world.

I have noted that God redeems all he allows. One way he is using the threat of IS is to call his people to intercede with greater intensity.

As Christians in the West come to understand that IS threatens not just the Middle East but the entire world, we will begin praying more fervently for the Holy Spirit to bring more jihadists to Jesus. Muslims already venerate Jesus as one of their six greatest prophets. They believe he was born of a virgin, lived a sinless life, ascended to heaven, and will return at the end of history.

Now Jesus is appearing to Muslims around the world in visions and dreams. As a result, more Muslims have come to Christ in the last fifteen years than in the previous fifteen centuries. For a hardened jihadist, committed to attacking the West and all Muslims who are not part of his or her sect, such a transformation is the only lasting answer. Every militant Muslim who finds Christ as Lord is not only one less enemy to the world—he or she is one more member of our eternal family.

If Jesus is your Lord, you're on the front lines of this battle with "the cosmic powers over this present darkness" (Ephesians 6:12). Our Father is calling his people to fight this battle on our knees. Please pray today for a great spiritual awakening in the Middle East. Pray for Jesus to reveal himself personally to Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi and other leaders of IS. Paul was converted from terrorist to apostle; what would happen if Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi came to Christ? Pray for Christians to be protected and for their witness to be courageous and effective. And pray for your own witness to be strong and joyful.

A pastor in Iraq was asked by an American missionary how he has maintained his joy in the face of mortal danger and national turmoil. His answer: "My Savior Jesus is with us wherever we go and he will never leave us." I recently received an email from a Syrian believer living in an area under attack from IS. He appeals for Christians to ask for God's protection, but says, "We are ready to go to Jesus now."

It was this kind of faith that empowered the twenty-one Coptic Christians who refused IS's demand to renounce their faith and gave their lives for Christ. What price will Christians pay for following Jesus today?

(Endnotes)

1. “Jihad” is the Arabic word for “struggle”; “jihadist” is often used to describe those who use terror to advance their version of Islam.
2. Thomas L. Friedman, “ISIS Heads to Rome,” *The New York Times*, February 25, 2015 (<http://www.nytimes.com/2015/02/25/opinion/thomas-friedman-isis-heads-to-rometml?rref=opinion&module=Ribbon&version=context®ion=Header&action=click&contentCollection=Opinion&pgtype=article>, accessed 26 February 2015).
3. Graeme Wood, “What ISIS Really Wants,” *The Atlantic*, March 2015 (<http://www.theatlantic.com/features/archive/2015/02/what-isis-really-wants/384980/>, accessed 25 February 2015). My description of IS’s apocalyptic vision largely follows his analysis.
4. David Liepert, “Muslims Predict Jesus Will Defeat ISIS, Beginning in 2015,” *HuffPost Religion*, February 24, 2015 (http://www.huffingtonpost.com/dr-david-liepert/muslims-predict-jesus-def_b_6725486.html?ncid=txtlnkusaolp00000592, accessed 26 February 2015).
5. Eric Schmitt and David D. Kirkpatrick, “Islamic State Sprouting Limbs Beyond Its Base,” *The New York Times*, February 14, 2015 (<http://www.nytimes.com/2015/02/15/world/middleeast/islamic-state-sprouting-limbs-beyond-mideast.html?smprod=nytcore-iphone&smid=nytcore-iphone-share>, accessed 25 February 2015).
6. Holly Yan, “Why is ISIS so successful at luring Westerners?” *CNN*, October 7, 2014 (<http://www.cnn.com/2014/10/07/world/isis-western-draw/>, accessed 26 February 2015).
7. The following discussion is informed by Brian Michael Jenkins, “When Jihadis Come Marching Home,” *Rand Corporation* (http://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/perspectives/PE100/PE130-1/RAND_PE130-1.pdf , accessed 26 February 2015).
8. Chris Wallace, “Rep. Mike Rogers discusses Iraq crisis; what’s next for the GOP after shake up in leadership?” *Fox News Sunday*, June 15, 2014 (<http://www.foxnews.com/on-air/fox-news-sunday-chris-wallace/2014/06/15/rep-mike-rogers-discusses-iraq-crisis-whats-next-gop-after-shake-leadership#p/v/3623734138001>, accessed 26 February 2015).
9. Rebecca Kaplan, “Will ISIS plan a 9/11-style terror plot against the U.S.?” *CBS News*, June 16, 2014 (<http://www.cbsnews.com/news/will-isis-plan-a-911-style-terror-plot-against-the-u-s/>, accessed 26 February 2015).



A B O U T U S

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