# ISIS and the Challenge of Interpreting Islam: Text, Context, and Islam-in-Modernity

The International Institute of Islamic Thought (IIIT) organized an "ISIS and the Challenge of Interpreting Islam: Text, Context, and Islam-in-Modernity" panel at the American Academy of Religion (AAR) Annual Meeting held on November 21, 2016, in San Antonio, TX. After the panel, it held a reception and presented the al Faruqi Memorial lecture. The panel brought together senior scholars of Islam, history, and cultural studies.

Moderator Ermin Sinanović (director, Research and Academic Programs, IIIT) divided it into three rounds and allowed questions after each round. Each round addressed an ISIS-related question: (1) "How should we best understand ISIS? Is it a product of Islamic tradition or something inherently modern? What is ISIS an example for?"; (2) "What role does the Islamic tradition play in enabling, justifying, or delegitimizing ISIS?"; and (3) "Is ISIS Islamic?"

The first speaker, Ovamir Anjum (Imam Khattab Endowed Chair of Islamic Studies, Department of Philosophy and Religious Studies, University of Toledo) reminded the audience of the commonality of violence for political ends in history by arguing that this is not a uniquely Islamic phenomenon. According to Islamic tradition, groups like ISIS that employ violence to kill Muslims and non-Muslims are *ghulāt* (extremists), rebels, or *khawārij*. One must understand ISIS within the Islamic tradition, because the group is using Islamic symbols. But this does not mean that it is an Islamic phenomenon.

In the second round, he contextualized the issue by stating that the number of Syrians killed by Bashar al-Assad is seven times higher than those killed

by ISIS. He remarked that "ISIS is horrifying for psychological reasons be-cause they use the pornography of violence, for example, not because they are a uniquely murderous threat. There are a lot of those in the world." Anjum also found its acts dangerous because its members justify their own biases in the name of Islam. He restated that the group is *khawārij*, enslaves and kills non-combatants, and rejects the authority of existent Islamic scholarship be-cause the Islamic juristic tradition forbids killing non-combatants.

Anjum responded to the final question by refusing to call ISIS "Islamic," for "Of course ISIS is making Islamic claims, but Islamic tradition is very complex and has been very difficult to agree on things except for a very, very few fundamentals throughout Islamic history." He also argued that "those who excommunicate Muslims en masse and kill for that reason are *khawārij*, and they must be fought. This is agreed upon by both Sunni and Shi'a scholars."

Ebrahim Moosa (professor of Islamic studies, Kroc Institute for Interna-tional Peace Studies; Department of History, Notre Dame) opened by analyz-ing the elements that have enabled ISIS to exist. He contended that ISIS is a product of the politics of empire, for political uprisings and the imperialistic undertakings of the United States destabilized the Middle East. Another ele-ment is the marginalized people, particularly the Sunnis of Iraq, especially after the Americans left. Moosa explained ISIS by stating that its members "have resorted to a theology of empire by trying to reinvent some practices of Muslims as well as people outside of Islam."

For the second round, he pointed out the tradition's polyvocality. He em-phasized the irony of ISIS' declaration that it has the best interpretation of the tradition, discussed how the group uses a variety of institutions to pursue its ambitions, and argued that in many ways ISIS is an incoherent hybridity. Tak-ing a different approach to the third question, he claimed that ISIS is "Islamic" but not "Muslim," referring to Shahab Ahmed's discussions in his book *What is Islam?* (2005). In essence, he asserted that ISIS is an anachronistic inter-pretation of Islam that is incoherent and chaotic. He concluded that "What is Islamic does not articulate what it means to be Muslim today."

Asma Afsaruddin (professor, Department of Near Eastern Languages and Cultures, Indiana University) described ISIS as a group that desires to reclaim tradition as its members see it, as a response to a modernity that, in their opin-ion, has disenfranchised them. She pointed out that medieval Islamic litera-ture's definition of non-combatants and the prohibition of targeting them, covers far more groups than modern international law does. Moreover, she argued that violating this rule is committing terrorism in modern times and creates mass fear. In her view, the followers of ISIS manipulate the traditional

symbols as well as modernity: "They take aspects of modernity when they are useful for them, while claiming to appeal to the tradition at the same time."

In the second round, she stated the importance of challenging the group's theological language by citing the response of over 100 Muslim scholars who refuted ISIS based upon the tradition and interrogated the group's understanding of the caliphate. For example, she mentioned the speech of its leader Abu Bakr al-Bagdadi, who had picked pieces from the first caliph Abu Bakr as they appeared in the earlier sources but then dismissed some important parts of that original speech, such as that "moral excellence is important in election and selection of the caliphate." Afsaruddin contended that these details matter and that "we should interrogate their interpretation of institutions because they legitimize them based on their own understanding."

Her answer to the last question was another question: "Is committing murder Islamic?" "No," she replied. According to her, we cannot make a distinction between "Muslim" and "Islamic," because "Islam incorporates being a Muslim and vice versa." She also added that killing a human being for no good moral reason simply cannot be considered Islamic, a point made by many Muslim ethicists and jurists as well.

Mona Hassan (assistant professor, departments of Religious Studies and History and the program of Duke University's International Comparative Studies) answered the questions in the context of her forthcoming book, *Longing for the Lost Caliphate: A Transregional History* (Princeton University Press), which will be available in January 2017. In her words, she spent years researching the caliphate in history long before the caliphate claims of ISIS entered our headlines. She spoke on the historic specificity of this issue and defined ISIS as "a product of shattered and traumatized Iraq." Hassan also remarked that there is a long history of both Muslim and non-Muslim groups drawing upon symbols to bolster and legitimize their political projects.

While answering what role Islamic tradition plays in delegitimizing ISIS, Hassan referred to a statistic that ISIS represents 0.0019 percent of global Muslim population and stated that "Mahdi Hassan describes that perhaps the most astonishing achievement of ISIS is not the sheer size of the territory, but the way in which they united the often divided 1.6 billion Muslims, whether Sunni or Shi'a, Salafi or Sufi, conservative or liberal, who condemn ISIS as un-Islamic." She also cited the Muslim scholars and institutions' wholesale rejection of ISIS as an Islamic group. Significantly, she mentioned the necessity of paying attention to the narratives of those marginalized and vulnerable communities that are attracted to ISIS, as well as listening to the stories of those who escaped from it, in order to formulate proactive strategies.

Hassan declined to answer either "yes" or "no" to the question "Is ISIS Islamic?" on the grounds that there are multiple ways to say what is Islam and what is Muslim. Referring to president-elect Donald Trump's campaign trail speeches, she stated: "What use do the words 'terror' and 'terrorism' serve? They serve to delegitimize the violence of others and to legitimize our own violence against them."

Asaad Al-Saleh (assistant professor of Arabic literature, Department of Comparative Literature and Cultural Studies, Indiana University) emphasized that ISIS is both a hybrid product and a rhetorical and ideological phenomenon. He stated that "If ISIS existed in, let's say the eighteenth century, that would be no issue [because] at that time each state, like ISIS, could exist without global resistance and every entity used to naturalize their use of violence." However, "the new region's political system does not allow an entity like ISIS to occupy land and use pre-modern violence." Al-Saleh also argued that ISIS' idea is based upon *tamkīn* (divine enabling), for "ISIS is trying to use Quranic verse, the *Sūrah Nūr* verse 55, from which they took the idea of *tamkīn* to say that 'we do this and God will finish the work for us.'" What misled ISIS was "not the Qur'an, but the way they understood the Qur'an."

In the second part, Al-Saleh asserted that "ISIS selectively takes the ideas from the tradition that fit their ideology, not as a whole. If instead they were taking the ideas entirely, there would be no ISIS." He remarked that those Muslim scholars who label it *khawārij* and non-Islamic also use the Islamic tradition, the Qur'an, and the Hadith, whereas ISIS uses symbolic traditional terms to legitimize its political aims without a proper understanding of the tradition. He added that "reclaiming Islam by collecting bits and pieces from here and there and showing it as a projection of Islam is problematic."

As for the last question, he simply asserted that ISIS does not understand the traditions it claims to be using. He stated that "If you answer the question positively, then it is almost like condemning Islam for ISIS. They cannot be referential for Islam." He also agreed with Afsaruddin's comments that killing a Muslim is not allowed and that scholars who are deeply rooted in Islamic traditions say that ISIS is not Islamic. "They are *khawārij* and infidels."

The panel attracted the interest of many scholars and graduate students. They raised various questions at the end of each round, many of which focused on how to contextualize ISIS within the Islamic tradition.

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