



## **ISIS in pursuit of its end: some reflections on its millenarian aspect**

[Published on 25. November 2015](#) by [Rui Tavares](#)

I think I know what ISIS attacked in Paris: the cosmopolitan and fraternal heart of a world-wide youth culture. (At least, that's what I remember from living there: when I looked at the map of the attacks in the 10th and 11th Parisian arrondissements, I looked right at the epicentre the street where I used to live when I was a young student.)

But I don't know what ISIS, the organisation to which the perpetrators belong, actually is. This post is an attempt at collecting some thoughts about what ISIS may be, and thereafter to connect (or contrast) those thoughts with the social, political and cultural conditions of life in Europe.

ISIS has been described, in the past year and a half, in two ways: either as an attempt to turn a terrorist movement into a state (merging, in fact, the different logics of terrorism and territorial control) or as a millenarian movement; that is, a movement that places its hopes and actions on the end of the world, in order to bring the kingdom of heaven to earth.

The two things are not incompatible. ISIS as state is not just any state but pretends to be a caliphate, not a caliphate as the old Ottoman Empire, venal and integrated into the international system, but supposedly the sole and definitive representative of the House of Islam, that all Muslims should submit to.

So, if ISIS is primarily a state, it is not a normal state — recognised by others and recognising others — that ISIS wants to be, which makes the millenarian clue worth exploring. So, what does it tell us?

Firstly, and quite surprisingly, looking at ISIS through the millenarian prism would tell us that ISIS will not last very long. Like all millenarian movements, its goal is to hasten the end of the world, so that the prophecies they believe in can be realised. Like many millenarian movements, ISIS has two options: deny reality or make concessions to it. There were movements in the past that prophesied the end of the world and, when the end of world did not arrive, limited themselves to alleging errors in calculations and got on with their lives. Others, however, refuse to accept that the end of the world does not come about. The only solution is then to force it through a Big Bang: collective suicide, indiscriminate massacre, a major conflagration or a combination of all three. In the millenarian apocalyptic version of reality, the death of the movement, as long as it happens with a bang, is the closest equivalent to the end of the world you can get.

The apocalypse that millenarians desire depends on the occurrence of a great battle between the few guardians of the faith and — nothing less — than the rest of the world. It is this great battle that ISIS is now trying to turn into reality by violence. If the millenarian clue makes any sense, ISIS (or at least a part of it strong enough to cause an irreversible reality) indeed wants to push the rest of the world to destroy it. Because in this ‘great conflagration’ two things can happen: either the prophecy comes true and saves the believers, giving them a victory and realising the final kingdom on earth: or the faithful are martyrs in every sense of the word and yet moving their eschatological vision forward and sowing the winds of future discord that can then bring the desired end of the world.

Of course this is only a working hypothesis, based on very few readings on the movement itself and a superficial knowledge about their type of Islam, and anchored in the memory of some classics on the millenarian movements. (Anyone who wants to know more about millenarianism should read ‘Pursuit of the Millenium’ by Norman Cohn; about Islamic millenarianism specifically, the book to recommend is ‘Apocalypse in Islam’, by Jean Pierre Filiu).

Anyway, it’s a working hypothesis to consider, I think.

The turning point for an apocalyptic movement that seeks not its sustainability, but their own destruction, may have already occurred as ISIS has attacking not only Russia and France, but also China (ISIS has for the first time executed a Chinese hostage this week). Including the US and the UK, ISIS is now at war (or trying to provoke war) with all permanent members of the UN Security Council. A strategy this foolish that cannot exist or be explained in rational terms, but it makes sense if ISIS wants to challenge the world to destroy it, leaving a death track and martyrdom in their area of action.

Last but not least, ISIS pitting itself for destruction against the rest of the world would ‘gloriously’ avoid a defeat at the hands of a lesser power as the Kurdish army. Or at least distract ISIS’ followers and possible recruits from the fact that ISIS is steadily losing territory. For a fanatical millenarian movement, an uninspiring military defeat won’t do. In the absence of a victory, however, a spectacular defeat would at least inspire others to pursue the same path in the future.

And this is where one should pivot from speculation about ISIS as a cult and turn towards the political and social conditions in Europe. Because a religious cult is one thing, there have been many in the history of humanity, but another thing is the ground where such a cult can find recruits, justification and support. All the conditions that have allowed for the easy recruitment of these terrorists still exist, from the hopeless suburbs in Europe to the deadly chaos in Iraq and Syria and the ‘Great Game’ played by geostrategic regional and global powers in the wider Middle East. These root conditions — which include youth unemployment in the Euro-Mediterranean area and among the Muslim youth in the EU, lack of democratic regimes and role models in the Arab-Muslim world, the ongoing Israeli-Palestinian conflict, the cynical profiteering off of the Syrian civil war by regional powers, the even more cynical relation between the West and Saudi Arabia, the rise of xenophobia and anti-refugee rhetoric in developed countries — are not being addressed and sometimes not even being debated. And they will endure after ISIS is destroyed, whenever that will happen.

According to the millenarianism hypothesis, in fact, ISIS will be destroyed sooner rather than later. All our other problems, however, will be here to last.

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