

## What ISIS really wants

By Dr Muriel Newman, NZCPR, 26 Feb 2015

Graeme Wood, a contributing editor of *The Atlantic*, has long been researching these issues and in a much heralded article *What ISIS Really Wants* (**Editor's note: this article really is essential reading...**) published last week, he has provided many of the answers. By talking to experts around the world, including many Islamic State supporters, Mr Wood has produced a comprehensive outline of the forces that are driving this dangerous movement.

### A radical Islamist rebel group

The Islamic State, also known as the Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham (ISIS), is a radical Islamist rebel group under the leadership of Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi.

Baghdadi is the third of four sons of a devout Sunni Muslim family in Iraq. After failing to qualify for entry into law at Baghdad University, he turned to Islamic theology, gaining a PhD in 1999. Arrested during the Gulf War in 2004, Baghdadi spent 10 months in the Camp Bucca detention centre in Southern Iraq where he is thought to have joined al-Qaeda. A “pupil” of Abu Musab al-Zarkawi, the brutal leader who pioneered the practice of beheading hostages and making them wear orange jumpsuits, from 2007 Baghdadi was responsible for providing religious “justification” for acts of terrorism carried out by al-Qaeda under Sharia law.

The Islamic State grew out of al-Qaeda. Baghdadi followed three guerrilla leaders, stepping up in May 2010 with the clear intention of establishing a *caliphate* - a state led by a religious leader and governed under Sharia Law – and becoming the *caliph*, or commander.

### Conditions outlined in Sunni law

A caliph has to meet certain conditions outlined in Sunni law: he has to be a Muslim man of Quraysh descent, exhibit moral probity and physical and mental integrity, and have authority over territory in which to enforce Islamic law.

By July 5 last year, when the Islamic State's leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi delivered a Ramadan sermon in the newly captured Iraqi city of Mosul, he had an area larger than the United Kingdom with 6 million inhabitants under his command. He claimed to have established the first caliphate since the Ottoman Empire, becoming the first caliph in generations.

### Islamic State must *hold* territory and *rule* it

While al-Qaeda operates as a geographically diffuse network of autonomous cells, to remain a legitimate caliphate, the Islamic State must *hold* territory and *rule* it, collecting taxes, regulating prices, operating courts, and administering services such as health care, education, and telecommunications. In addition, *full* Sharia law must be implemented, obliging Muslims from around the world to immigrate to the territory to live under the law.

Some estimate that around 85 percent of Sharia law is in abeyance from the lives of most modern Muslims. *Full* Sharia law includes medieval traditions found in sacred texts - such as slavery, crucifixion, beheadings, stonings, and amputations - that may have lain dormant for hundreds of years. Once a caliphate has been created, these laws - along with a huge body of

other jurisprudence - suddenly awaken, and laws like crucifixion, which is specified in the Koran as one of the only punishments permitted for enemies of Islam, must be used. If the caliph tries to 'water down' full Sharia law, he risks excommunication.

### **The caliph commands obedience**

Anyone supporting non-Muslim governments is considered to have turned their back on their religion and is subject to death. Shiites (most Iraqi Arabs are Shiite) are also condemned, since Shiism is regarded as innovation on the Koran, thus denying its initial perfection. That means roughly 200 million Shia - along with the leaders of every Muslim country that has elevated man-made law above Sharia - are marked for death.

The Islamic State is committed to 'purifying' the world by killing vast numbers of people. A ban on the use of cellphones (punishable by whipping or amputation) as well as a lack of objective reporting hides the true extent of the slaughter, but social-media posts suggest that individual executions happen more or less continually, with mass executions every few weeks. Muslim 'apostates' are the most common victims. Some Christians are being exempted - as long as they acknowledge subjugation to the new government and pay special taxes.

### **Talk of the apocalypse**

The Islamic State's propaganda is filled with talk of the apocalypse - when the armies of Rome will meet the armies of Islam in the Syrian city of Dabiq, near Aleppo. Now the Islamic State has taken Dabiq, it is awaiting the arrival of an enemy army, whose defeat will initiate the countdown to the apocalypse. As the masked executioner showing the severed head of the aid worker Peter Kassig said in a November video, "Here we are, burying the first American crusader in Dabiq, eagerly waiting for the remainder of your armies to arrive".

While prophecies refer to the enemy as 'Rome', many think that *Rome* means Turkey, which ended the last caliphate 90 years ago. Others suggest that Rome might mean an infidel army of Americans. In reality 'Rome' could be any nation regarded as the enemy.

### **Caliph must operate an 'offensive jihad'**

Once a caliphate has been declared, the caliph must operate an 'offensive jihad', waging war at least once a year to expand its territory. Islamic law does not recognise borders and it rejects permanent peace treaties. Should the Islamic State lose control of its territory it will cease to be a caliphate and the oaths of allegiance - including the religious duty for Muslims to immigrate and serve - are no longer binding. The propaganda value of the caliphate would disappear.

To keep up the supply of fighters, the Islamic State has reduced the age of conscription from 18 years to 15. Officials are now going through cities like Mosul, which has a population of 1.5 million, conscripting at least one young man from each family. The punishment for those who are not willing to fight ranges from 80 lashes to execution.

It is within this context that other nations are seeking to contain the Islamic State through air strikes. Every month that it fails to expand, it resembles less the conquering state of the Prophet and more like another Middle Eastern government failing to bring prosperity to its people. While it is still receiving significant financial support from sympathisers outside of Iraq and

Syria to expand its war effort, many of the Gulf oil states are giving money to prevent it from invading their territory.

### **“Modern-day Crusade to kill Muslims”**

Ironically the biggest proponent of an American invasion is the Islamic State itself. If America were to be drawn into a ground fight it would be a huge propaganda victory for jihadists worldwide and would massively bolster recruitment, through claims that the United States was embarking on a modern-day Crusade to kill Muslims.

To date the Islamic State attacks on Western targets have been the actions of frustrated supporters unable to immigrate to the caliphate because of confiscated passports or other problems. While the Islamic State applauds such attacks, it hasn't as yet planned or financed one. (The *Charlie Hebdo* attack in Paris last month was an al-Qaeda operation.)

Graeme Wood predicts that the Islamic State will eventually become hamstrung by its radicalism. It has no allies and the land it controls is mostly uninhabited and poor. If it stagnates, its credibility as the engine of God's will and the agent of apocalypse will weaken. Fewer believers will arrive, and the movement will be discredited.

### **Discord within the Muslim world**

There is also discord within the Muslim world over the authenticity of the 'caliph'. While Baghdadi is a jihadists Salafi (a branch of Sunnism), most Salafis are not jihadists and most reject the Islamic State. While these *Quietist* Salafis are committed to expanding Islam, they believe that Muslims should not divide one another. Neither do they believe that God anointed Baghdadi saying that a caliph could only arise out of a consensus of scholars from Mecca and Medina.

The Islamic State's ambitions and strategy were spelt out in social-media chatter as far back as 2011, when it was just one of many terrorist groups in Syria and Iraq. Followers were told that the group's ambition was to "restore the Islamic caliphate". Baghdadi had already styled himself as "commander of the faithful," a title ordinarily reserved for caliphs. Foreign fighters who'd heard their message began joining their ranks.

When the caliphate was declared, the number of recruits escalated - thousands of foreign Muslims from France, the United Kingdom, Belgium, Germany, Holland, Australia, Indonesia, the United States, and even New Zealand are thought to have immigrated to the Islamic State. Many have gone to fight, and some intend to die.

This week's NZCPR Guest Commentator, Dr Ron Smith, the former Director of International Relations and Security Studies at Waikato University, outlines the pros and cons of New Zealand contributing to military action against the Islamic State:

### **“Should we join this coalition?”**

“There is an international coalition, led by the United States, which is said to be dedicated to the destruction, or, at least 'containment' of the Islamic State threat. So the question for New Zealand is, should we join this coalition? We are talking here of many of our traditional allies and security partners.

“As a small state, traditionally supportive of collective security, the answer seems to be ‘yes’. This is particularly so when we note that these traditional allies are also major trading partners. And what we are being asked to do is not, after all, a great deal. We have been asked to provide a few dozen trainers for the Iraqi army. These New Zealand military personnel will be situated on a secure military base and will not be engaged in combat operations. Surely, we cannot refuse?”

### **International coalition of 60+ nations opposing the Islamic State**

The international coalition of more than 60 nations opposing the Islamic State already has a sizeable contingent of troops in Iraq including 3,000 from the US, 700 from Canada, 600 from Australia, 300 from Spain, 280 from Italy, 250 from Denmark, and Britain will soon have 2,000. While some are engaged in airstrikes - the US and Britain have carried out 1,383 airstrikes in Iraq and 1,094 in Syria - most personnel are involved in training the Iraqi Army, which is estimated to have 250,000 troops, plus armed police.

Some estimates put the Islamic State’s armed forces at over 100,000, including over 20,000 foreign fighters. Their internet recruitment campaign using social media to connect young radicalised Muslims with jihadists in Syria and Iraq is said to have overtaken Al-Qaeda in its effectiveness.

The threat to humanity and world peace posed by the Islamic State cannot be underestimated – especially if they gain the allegiance of al-Qaeda. Anyone who believes in human rights should surely support all efforts to contain and defeat them.