

Yearning for the apocalypse

By Merv Bendle, Quadrant Online, 12 Mar 2015

Borrowing a bit from here and there, The Prophet stitched together a narrative that Islam would impose its peace on the world after a pitched battle near the town of Dabiq, which ISIS has spared no effort to capture and hold. That's the script -- and jihadis are following it to the letter

The announcement that Nigeria's monstrous jihadist organization, Boko Haram, has **declared allegiance to the Islamic State** indicates that the world is now facing a co-ordinated global jihad led by ISIS and the new Caliph, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi. In addition to ISIS's homefront of Syria and Iraq, this campaign involves its affiliates and supporters in Libya, Yemen, Algeria, Pakistan, Egypt, Afghanistan, and Tunisia. It also involves Indonesia, where the leader of Jemaah Islamiah, Abu Bakar Bashir, has declared his group's support for Islamic State, and hundreds of Indonesians are already flocking to ISIS, with a desire to be "part of the 'final battle' written of in Islamic texts" **as an analyst Sidney Jones pointed out in *The Australian***. Even Saudi Arabia, an ostensibly conservative (albeit Wahhabi) Sunni state, is allegedly **having difficulty restricting the flow of volunteers** and funding to ISIS, a situation faced also by Qatar, Kuwait, and other Gulf states.

The crisis of Islam

Given Islamic State's own explicit declarations, it appears the crisis of Islam is entering its final, apocalyptic phase, one that may last for decades and produce cataclysmic violence and destruction. This will be especially the case if it engulfs nuclear nations in the region. These include mutually hostile states like Sunni Pakistan and Shi'ite Iran (which will shortly be producing nuclear weapons, given the Obama administration's present policy of appeasement), and Israel. Such an appalling outcome will be far from accidental, as ISIS has made it clear that it is acting in accordance with a theological narrative that depicts contemporary history in apocalyptic terms, as I will discuss below.

Although it is frequently overlooked by commentators and analysts, the principal driving force behind the crisis of Islam is demographic, as I pointed out in "**How Civilizations Die**". While the population of Western countries ages while remaining steady or declining, the Muslim population of key countries will continue to grow for decades. For example, the Muslim population of Pakistan will grow from 178 million in 2010 to 256 million in 2030; Bangladesh from 149 million to 188 million; Egypt from 80 million to 105 million; Iran from 75 million to 90 million; India from 177 million to 236 million; and Indonesia from 205 million to 239 million. In the Middle-East and North Africa, where ISIS is most active and successful in attracting members and generating support, the increase will be from 322 million to 440 million; while in Sub-Saharan Africa, where Boko Haram is in the vanguard, it will be from 243 million to 386 million – an incredible 59% increase in only 15 years. In Europe, where the

problem takes on sinister dimensions, the Muslim population will grow from 44 million to 58 million, and overall the global Muslim population will expand from 1.62 billion in 2010 to 2.19 billion in 2030 – only 15 years away. (See <http://www.pewforum.org/interactives/muslim-population-graphic/>)

Nigeria is an outstanding prize for ISIS

The situation of Nigeria is unique and its demography (and comparative wealth) explains why it is an outstanding prize for ISIS. It has undergone an extraordinary population explosion, from 38 million in 1950 to 180 million at present, with its population projected to reach 440 million by 2050, when it is expected to become the third-most populous country in the world, and 914 million by 2100. Its population is divided exactly in half between Muslims (in the North) and Christians (in the South). By mid-century, if the country survives in its present form (it plunged into civil war in 1967-70, killing around 3 million people), it will have a Muslim population of some 220 million.

Crucially, this expanding population profile across the Muslim world will be characterized by a massive ‘youth bulge’. For example, almost a third of the population of Nigeria, Egypt and Pakistan **are between 15 and 29**. Across the Muslim world, this cohort already numbers in the hundreds of millions, and by 2030 it will approach half a billion young people, vast numbers of whom will be impoverished, unemployed or under-employed, and eager to embrace jihadism and other extremist ideologies. They will be increasingly estranged from a modern world that not only appears to offer them little hope for an acceptable future, but also holds up before them visions of an affluent Western lifestyle that will be forever beyond their grasp.

Vast disparity of life chances

This cohort has a life expectancy of around 65-70 years and is therefore looking ahead to decades of life characterized by increasing stringency, turmoil, and repression while also being acutely aware of the affluence and freedoms of the West. This alertness to the vast disparity of life chances between the Muslim world and the West is facilitated and intensified by the increasing ease of travel, the existence of networked Muslim diasporas throughout the West, the ubiquity of the media and the Internet, and the increasing activism of Islamist organizations. Inevitably, it breeds envy, frustration, and resentment.

It also breeds rage

It also breeds rage — a rage driven by the conviction that history has taken a wrong turn and that the global dominion promised to Muslims for over a millennium, Islam’s divinely ordained destiny to rule the world, has been illicitly and treacherously stolen. It is this rage that Islamic State and similar groups are seeking to mobilize in the pursuit of global jihad, pursued with apocalyptic determination. As Bernard Lewis pointed out **in an epoch-defining article 25 years ago**, the struggle between Islam and the West has been ongoing for some 1400 years:

It began with the advent of Islam, in the seventh century, and has continued virtually to the present day. It has consisted of a long series of attacks and counterattacks, jihads and crusades, conquests and reconquests. For the first thousand years Islam was advancing, Christendom in retreat and under threat. The new faith conquered the old Christian lands of the Levant and North Africa, and invaded Europe, ruling for a while in Sicily, Spain, Portugal, and even parts of France. The attempt by the Crusaders to recover the lost lands of Christendom in the east was thrown back, and even the Muslims' loss of south-western Europe to the Reconquista [in Spain] was amply compensated by the Islamic advance into south-eastern Europe, which twice reached as far as Vienna.

Islam on the defensive since 1683

However, since the Ottoman armies were defeated at the siege of Vienna in 1683, Islam has been on the defensive. Not only did the West turn back Islam's previously irresistible expansion, it came to colonize and dominate Muslim lands. More recently, although the colonial period has passed, Western popular culture and values continue to be projected relentlessly into Muslim societies, saturating them with visions of an apparently licentious and lascivious lifestyle that transgress virtually every tenet of Islam. This colonization and cultural hegemony has produced a profound sense of humiliation and betrayal amongst Muslims:

The Muslim has suffered successive stages of defeat. The first was his loss of domination in the world, to the advancing power of Russia and the West. The second was the undermining of his authority in his own country, through an invasion of foreign ideas and laws and ways of life and sometimes even foreign rulers or settlers, and the enfranchisement of native non-Muslim elements. The third—the last straw—was the challenge to his mastery in his own house, from emancipated women and rebellious children.

The sense of shame is intolerable

The outcome was unavoidable, as the sense of shame is intolerable in a culture based on a rigid code of honour:

It was too much to endure, and the outbreak of rage against these alien, infidel, and incomprehensible forces that had subverted his dominance, disrupted his society, and finally violated the sanctuary of his home was inevitable. It was also natural that this rage should be directed primarily against the millennial enemy and would draw its strength from ancient beliefs and loyalties.

Conviction the world is about to witness the Apocalypse

Chief amongst these ancient beliefs is the conviction that the world is about to witness the Apocalypse, as Allah intervenes decisively to expunge the infidels from history and deliver the world to the Islamic masses. For those convinced of this scenario, the Islamic State is expected

to play a lead role. As Graeme Wood points out in his comprehensive article, “**What ISIS Really Wants**”

“The Islamic State is no mere collection of psychopaths. It is a religious group with carefully considered beliefs, among them that it is a key agent of the coming apocalypse ... the Islamic State differs from nearly every other current jihadist movement in believing that it is written into God’s script as a central character”.

Signs of the End Times

As America and its allies began their withdrawal from Iraq, the founders of ISIS gained confidence and came to see the signs of the End Times everywhere. In particular, they came to anticipate the imminent appearance of the Mahdi, Islam’s messianic figure who it is taught will lead the Muslim masses to victory in an apocalyptic battle. They believe they have a central role in this event, and “it is in this casting that the Islamic State is most boldly distinctive from its predecessors and clearest in the religious nature of its mission”, as Wood points out.

Such apocalyptic convictions have been immensely powerful throughout history, as Norman Cohn pointed out in *The Pursuit of the Millennium* (1970), and they have become extremely prominent in the last half century, intensifying after the 9/11 attacks, as I discussed in “**The Apocalyptic Imagination and Popular Culture**” (2005). It is this apocalyptic belief that both explains Islamic State’s broad appeal to its supporters and underlies its deliberately provocative atrocities (beheadings, genocide, systematic rape and enslavement, destruction of heritage sites, etc.), which explicitly transgress all principles of the civilization they seek to negate and erase from history. On one hand, these outrages are designed to convince supporters of its messianic élan and absolute determination to impose Sharia law and expunge all traces of the non-Islamic world from the lands it controls. On the other hand, they are calculated to force the hand of the Western powers and draw them into an all-engulfing ground war in the Middle East that Islamic State believes will usher in the End Times.

Christian fundamentalists believe Armageddon

Just as Christian fundamentalists believe that Armageddon — the final apocalyptic battle between Christ and the Antichrist — will be fought at Megiddo, an area south of the Sea of Galilee, so ISIS believes the definitive showdown with the West will occur around the Syrian city of Dabiq, near Aleppo, which it seized at considerable military cost in August, 2014. To make this link explicit, *Dabiq* is the title of Islamic State’s online bulletin used for propaganda and recruitment purposes. According to Wood:

Now that it has taken Dabiq, the Islamic State awaits the arrival of an enemy army whose defeat there will initiate the countdown to the apocalypse. Western media frequently miss references to Dabiq in the Islamic State’s videos, and focus instead on lurid scenes of beheading. “Here we are, burying the first American crusader in Dabiq, eagerly waiting for

the remainder of your armies to arrive,” said a masked executioner in a November video featuring the severed head of [an] aid worker who had been held captive for more than a year.

Islamic State is seeking a military showdown

Islamic State is seeking a military showdown it is convinced it is theologically pre-ordained to win. Consequently, as Wood points out, when its fighters reported seeing American soldiers in battle in December, 2014, “Islamic State Twitter accounts erupted in spasms of pleasure, like over-enthusiastic hosts or hostesses upon the arrival of the first guests at a party”.

Not only does this vision of a final, decisive and apocalyptic battle mimic Christian dogma, so does the advent of Al-Masih ad-Dajjal, the one-eyed false messiah foretold by Muhammad, **replicate the role to be played by the Antichrist** in Armageddon . Consequently, as with the Christian fundamentalist concern with the Antichrist, so Muslim interest in Dajjal is extreme, especially on the Internet and social media. According to ancient Muslim prophecy, Dajjal will emerge from Khorasan (a region in the vicinity of Iran, Turkmenistan and Afghanistan) and will travel the world preaching a false message and gathering a vast following. Eventually he will lead an army of 70,000 Jews in battle against an army of the righteous led by Isa (the Muslim version of Jesus, who is regarded as the second greatest prophet in Islam). Under the auspices of the Mahdi, Isa will vanquish Dajjal, the latter’s followers will be rooted out and destroyed (as even the trees and rocks will denounce them), all conflict will cease across the world, and humanity will finally embrace Islam as the one true faith.

Extreme beliefs have a special appeal for “true believers”

These are extreme beliefs, and they have a special appeal, as Wood notes, for “true believers—the kind who long for epic good-versus-evil battles— [and for whom] visions of apocalyptic bloodbaths fulfil a deep psychological need”. Such beliefs are difficult for Westerners to come to terms with because the aggressive secularism of their societies blinds their leaders and opinion-makers to the massive role that religion plays in the human society. Increasingly, however, the West and its secular ideologies are a minority presence in a world characterized by what the pioneering scholar of fundamentalism, Giles Kepel, called *The Revenge of God: The Resurgence of Islam, Christianity and Judaism in the Modern World* (1994), and what a similarly prescient scholar, Mark Juergensmeyer, called *Global Rebellion: Religious Challenges to the Secular State* (2008). The complex dynamics that such writers identify will be particularly intense in regions like the Middle East, Sub-Saharan Africa, and Indonesia, where the population of young Muslims will grow enormously through the coming decades, providing masses of enthusiastic would-be jihadists.

Historically, apocalyptic visions have been extremely effective in mobilizing the masses of religious faithful, and this has been especially the case where the latter live in absolute or comparative deprivation, real or perceived. The key factor however, has been the presence of

a charismatic personality or figurehead, around whom a cadre of committed militants can coalesce and act as a revolutionary vanguard, developing, applying, and enforcing an extremist ideology. Osama bin Laden played this role with al-Qaeda, but his successor, Ayman al-Zawahiri, is conspicuous for his lack of charisma, and is frequently ridiculed by members of ISIS. It is therefore a crucial feature of the Islamic State that its leadership cadre selected one of their own, al-Baghdadi, and elevated him to the status of Caliph. According to Wood's analysis, his close followers have made it clear that they expect him to act strictly in accordance with the theologically-based 'prophetic methodology', central to which is relentless jihad, and they are convinced this will lead them to victory in the apocalyptic battles to come. When these hopes are eventually dashed – as they inevitably will be – al-Baghdadi will disappear from the stage.

Untold damage may well be done

Tragically, untold damage may well be done before then, while the demographic tsunami driving the crisis of Islam will ensure that other messianic figures will appear to take his place. Such will be the history of the next forty years.