Postprint

How Cosmic War Ends: The Case of ISIS

Mark Juergensmeyer

ABSTRACT
Like many other extremist movements, the Islamic State (ISIS) is propelled by an image of engagement in a grand cosmic war. Under what conditions does cosmic war end? The case of ISIS gives several possible answers, though we have to take both internal and external perspectives into account. The internal conditions include a *loss of divine sanctions, in-fighting,* a sense of *rising doubt* about the mission of the movement, *discredited leadership,* when the leader is seen as less than legitimate, and the availability of *alternative opportunities,* when combatants see opportunities for their roles in a non-war state. External conditions for ending cosmic war are equally important. Responses by government authorities include the maintenance of *strong limitations* on the ability of a movement to become violent; providing ways for the *accommodation and rehabilitation* of troops and leaders involved in the defeated movement; and an attitude of *respect and cultural acceptance* for communities that may have supported the extremist movements. In Iraq and Syria, it remains to be seen how Sunni Arab culture and leadership will be treated in a post-ISIS society. Military liberation is only part of the process of reintegration of the Arab Sunni population into the political life of those countries. A full acceptance into the political process will also be required. Failing that, the spirit of cosmic war will in all probability continue, and the conditions will be ripe for a renewal of militant encounter in the future.

"They are constantly at war," a Sunni Arab young man told me about the Islamic State movement that controlled the city of Mosul where he lived in terror, until it was liberated by coalition forces in 2017. When I interviewed him in a refugee camp near the destroyed village of Hassan Sham at the outskirts of Mosul, he was still recounting the terror of the years under the movement's control and the nightmare of battle in the days leading up to the liberation of the city. He knew that a number of former sympathizers for the Islamic State—he would not say whether or not he was one of them—had now turned against the regime and willingly fled from its control. For him, the terror of the imagined war of the Islamic State was beginning to recede.

But what does it really mean for ISIS to be over? The territorial control of ISIS has been only part of the story. Equally as significant is the worldview of cosmic war that it has projected

and that has appealed to young people around the world who participate in it vicariously through the internet and social media. How does this notion of warfare, so all-consuming and central to the leitmotif of a movement, come to an end? [1]

Cosmic War

In my previous work, including *Terror in the Mind of God: The Global Rise of Religious Violence,* I have identified the notion of cosmic war as being central to every violent movement related in some way to religion (Juergensmeyer 2016a, 2017). I called it "cosmic war," because of its all-encompassing world view, and its uncompromising absolutism. It is similar to the idea of "absolute war" as described by the 19th century theoretician of war, Carl von Clausewitz (1832), who regarded most wars as negotiable—as "politics by other means;" political instruments rather than the ideal type of all-or-nothing war that is in the background of the idea of war, but seldom realized in actual battle. Yet, the kind of imagined war in the religious template of many of today's extremist movements is precisely this kind of absolute war. It appropriates traditional images of *holy war*, which imagines God to be guiding military engagements that are thought to be - ultimately - waged on a transcendent-spiritual plane as all-or-nothing battles against evil. Needless to say, these images can complicate conflicts, because they baptize the militants' ideas of warfare with religious authority. The notion of a divinely sanctioned war gives an all-encompassing world view to those who embrace it. They imagine themselves as religious soldiers who are fighting for God and who can count on divine forces to help them fight back against the forces of evil.

The image of cosmic war is a potent force. When the template of spiritual battle is implanted onto a worldly opposition, it dramatically changes the perception of the conflict by those engaged in it, and it vastly alters the way that the struggle is waged. It absolutizes the conflict into extreme, opposing positions and demonizes opponents by imagining them to be satanic powers. Evil enemies are often fictions created by the necessity of war: that is, rather than the common-sense notion that people go to war because they have enemies, in cosmic war enemies are often created in order to fulfill the idea of war. War comes first; it is an all-encompassing world view that is created in order to make sense of extreme social disruption, humiliation, and despair.

Much of the violence perceived as terrorism around the world is directly related to the absolutism of conflict in these fantastic notions of cosmic war. The demonization of enemies allows those who regard themselves as soldiers for God to kill with no moral judgement. They feel that their acts will give them spiritual rewards.

The idea of cosmic war has several characteristics that have to be overcome in order for an extremist religious movement to renounce violence:

-the conviction that opponents are evil enemies, non-human satanic beings
-the moral approval of any means being acceptable in an absolute war
-the notion that only complete victory is acceptable, no compromise is conceivable

It is my contention that no movement of violent religious activism has truly ended until the causes of cosmic war have been corrected or when all of these characteristics have been

---

ameliorated. This means a fundamental alteration or rejection of images of cosmic war. We know that such visions of cosmic war can rise up suddenly with striking popular force. Can they end equally as suddenly, and if so, how?

My hypothesis is that images of cosmic war end when the conditions of frustration and humiliation that led to the rise of a cosmic war world view are altered, or when the fictional construct of cosmic war no longer seems viable. In order to understand the measures that lead to these changes in attitude and the diminishment of images of cosmic war, I have looked closely at several case studies involving field trips to talk with people in the movements, and those affected by them, to understand how world views can change. ISIS was one of them, and the following analyses and reflections are based on my work on that case.[2]

How ISIS Ends

The Islamic State of Iraq and Syria—ISIS—appears to be at an end. After the fall of Fallujah and Ramadi in 2016 came the major assaults in 2017 on the former ISIS strongholds of Mosul and Raqqa. They were besieged by an unlikely coalition of forces allied to ISIS—the Iraqi Army, the Syrian Army, Sunni tribal militia, and various Syrian and Iraqi Kurdish militia. In the northern part of Syria and Iraq, from Kobani to the strategic town of Sinjar, the region was liberated by Kurdish forces. The vast territorial reach of ISIS in 2015 that encompassed much of eastern Syria and western Iraq shrank by the end of 2017 to a small network of outposts with the intervening landscape under questionable control (Gerges, Hegghammer, McCants, Stern and Berger, Wood).

Moreover, ISIS lost support both within and outside its territory of control. Military strikes from the United States military and its coalition, along with Russian efforts, crippled the movement's transportation infrastructure and economic power. The numbers of foreign volunteers dwindled, in part because they were killed off in military encounters, in suicide attacks, and by missile strikes. Two of their most famous recruits, notorious around the world for beheading ISIS captives, were themselves killed by targeted strikes. Scores, perhaps hundreds, tried to return home, the men weary of being used as cannon fodder, the women desperate from being used as sex slaves.

The terrorist attacks in Istanbul, Paris, Brussels and elsewhere in 2016 and 2017 were meant to contradict this bad publicity, to portray an illusion of power. The acts were intended to bolster the morale of the ISIS stalwarts and to show potential young Muslim volunteers from around the world that ISIS is still capable of making a global impact. Yet, ISIS as an organization with territorial control was on a downward slide.

Still, the vision of ISIS—the idea of cosmic war that it embraced—endured in the minds of many of its leaders and followers in Syria and Iraq, and in the internet community on Twitter, Telegram, and other digital networks on line. Is ISIS really over? And what will come in its place? To answer these questions, we have to look at what ISIS has been—not just one movement but at least three different sorts of groups in an uneasy coalition, each with its own agenda and its own possibilities for long-term continuity, even after the fall of ISIS' territorial claims. ISIS is simultaneously a movement for Sunni Muslim empowerment, a global jihadi movement, and an apocalyptic cult. Each of these groups may be around in one form or another long after the roads from Baghdad to Mosul and from Damascus to Raqqa have been secured.

---

[2] For an earlier consideration of these issues, see Juergensmeyer 2016b.

ISIS as Sunni Empowerment

Though ISIS seemed to come out of nowhere, its territorial claims were very specific: the Arab Sunni heartland of eastern Syria and western Iraq. Before the leaders of the movement shortened its name to "the Islamic State" (or "Caliphate"), it called itself *al-Dawla al-Islamiya al-Iraq al-Sham,* an Arabic phrase that can be translated into English as "the Islamic State of Iraq and Greater Syria." The term *al-Sham,* or "greater Syria," includes the present nation states of Syria, Lebanon, Jordan, and Israel, the region that the French called "the Levant", which is why its initials in English are sometimes given as ISIL rather than ISIS. It is also called "Da'ish or Daesh," a word based on the acronym for the Arabic name for the movement. By coincidence, in Arabic, the term *daesh* also means something like the word for "bullies," and for that reason ISIS leaders are annoyed by its usage. Probably also for that reason the term persists among those victimized by it.

Though newly empowered in 2014, the origins of the movement date back to the social unrest that developed in Iraq after the invasion and occupation by coalition troops led by the United States military in 2003. At that time the overthrow of the Iraqi dictator, Saddam Hussein, was greeted by a certain degree of apprehension within al Anbar province and other areas of western Iraq where Arab Sunni Muslim communities dominated (Gerges, Stern and Berger, Wood). When I spoke with Sunni leaders from al Anbar province in Iraq in 2004, they told me that they did not mourn the loss of Saddam Hussein, but what they feared was the loss of Sunni power. Even though Saddam's rule was secular, it had favored his own minority Sunni community. In post-Saddam Iraq, the Shi'a majority in the rich river valleys stretching from Baghdad to Basra had begun to claim power and marginalize the Sunnis.

For this reason, any movement that promised power to Sunnis in the region was appealing. The Sunni shining knight that appeared on the scene in 2004 was a militant jihadi from Jordan, Abu Musab al-Zarqawi. Born into a refugee Palestinian family, the young Zarqawi turned to a life of drugs and petty theft in his youth, but later underwent a conversion into a strict form of Islam influenced by the rigid moral codes of the Wahhabi form of Islam prominent in Saudi Arabia (Gerges). Among other things, it allowed for beheading as an acceptable punishment for those who threatened the faith.

For a time, however, al Qaeda in Iraq was defeated. Zarqawi was killed and even more important, the Sunnis were pacified. In 2007, U.S. troops were withdrawn from the Sunni regions of western Iraq and local tribal militias were empowered to turn against al Qaeda in Iraq, which eventually restored the region to traditional tribal and religious leadership control. The operation was dubbed the "Awakening." This solution worked well while the U.S. was still the occupying force in Iraq, but when the U.S. military withdrew its troops in 2011, the responsibility for maintaining the support of the Sunni tribal leaders fell on the shoulders of al Maliki and the Shi'a dominated government in Baghdad. Alas, al Maliki abandoned the Arab Sunni leaders, choosing to shore up his political support largely from his own Shi'a base by using government funding and positions as payouts to his political supporters. Once again, the Arab Sunnis regarded themselves as marginal and disenfranchised.

This is where Abu Bakr al Baghdadi and his Islamic State came into the picture. He had been part of the original al Qaeda in Iraq, and initially retained that name for his movement until differences with Osama bin Laden led him to drop the name and the affiliation, and proclaim himself the caliph of a new Islamic State. The uprising in neighboring Syria that began in 2011 gave him a nearby base of operations as his cadres infiltrated the resistance fighters and built their own jihad army, eventually controlling large sections of Sunni Arab dominated sections of

eastern Syria. In 2014, the movement roared over the borders between Syria and Iraq, even conquering Iraq's second largest city, Mosul, which it plundered for its wealth and military armament.

The complicity of the Sunni Arab population in the ISIS administration in Syria and Iraq has been largely opportunistic, not ideological. When I interviewed villagers in 2015 in Iraq's Kurdistan who had fled ISIS control, they told me that the only people in their villages who supported ISIS did so for political and economic reasons. These Sunnis and their tribal leaders could as easily turn against ISIS as they have supported it, if they were given other options for participation in public life. This is what happened during the Awakening movement, and al Baghdadi remembers how fickle the Sunni followers were in abandoning al Qaeda in Iraq at that time. For this reason, he has instituted a reign of terror in ISIS controlled areas to intimidate the Sunni populace into compliance.

It seems fair to describe ISIS as a terrorist regime, since it uses extreme acts of violence to intimidate both its enemies and its own population. The savage beheadings of Western journalists and aid workers that were posted on the Internet were matched by dozens, perhaps hundreds, of beheadings of recalcitrant Sunnis under ISIS' control who refused to go along with its demands or who dared to be identified as Christians, Yazidis, and other minorities—or even as modern people who liked to dress in a Western style. For ISIS, terror has been an instrument of governance.

The imagined cosmic war of ISIS has been a real war in the perception of most Sunni Arabs who have cooperated with the ISIS regime. It is a struggle for Sunni supremacy, and their imagined struggle will not really end until they have achieved what they feel is their rightful leadership in the region, unfettered by Shi'a political domination. So, when cities such as Ramadi and Fallujah have been liberated, most of the population may have been relieved to see the terrorist excesses of ISIS go. They were not, however, pleased to see a Shi'a based government take charge, or to subject themselves to marauding bands of Shi'a militia. Hence, the long-range future of eastern Syria and western Iraq is open to question.

For most Sunni Arabs in eastern Syria and western Iraq, the image of cosmic war is a sometimes thing, spurred on largely by the frustration of feeling like they are a conquered and dominated people. Their motives for supporting ISIS have been largely socio-political, rather than ideological. Yet, their abandonment of cosmic war cannot be taken for granted. If there are no efforts at conciliation, of granting the tribal leaders the respect and agency that they think they deserve, they could easily support the revival of ISIS or some other radical anti-government opposition. They still are at war with the state since they think the state is at war with them; yet if the state's attitude changes (as it did during the awakening movement) cosmic war will finally disappear.

ISIS as a Global Jihadi Movement
ISIS is more than territory, and more than a Sunni Arab enterprise. Al Baghdadi's strategy of recruiting young people from around the world to participate in a glorious struggle has succeeded perhaps far beyond his expectations. For them the image of cosmic war was one of global proportions, engaging would-be soldiers from far corners of the globe. The ISIS-related attackers in San Bernardino were from Saudi Arabia; the Paris nightclub and Brussels airport bombers were Belgian of Moroccan descent; the Orlando shooter was an American of Afghan descent; the attackers at the Istanbul airport in June 2016 were from Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, and Dagestan. None were Syrian or Iraqi, the areas where ISIS has its territorial base, yet in those areas

foreigners from around the world have come to join the Caliphate's army. "They are all foreigners," one refugee told me in describing the ISIS soldiers who captured his village in northern Iraq.

This far flung network is maintained through Internet communication, through Twitter and closed websites, and through glossy online magazines such as *Dabiq* and *Rumiyah,* so that it amounts to something of a Cyber Caliphate. The young people who were lured to this network and who maintain it came with a variety of motives. Perhaps the strongest was the desire to be involved in a great war, a cosmic struggle that allowed them to play out all of their computer game fantasies of warcraft, valor, and gore. But some also came out of a sense of history and piety, a conviction that they were laying their lives on the line for something of transcendent importance for Islamic civilization.

Some of the young volunteers from around the world were attracted to the dramatic vision of apocalyptic cosmic war that animated the inner circle of the movement; others also joined the movement to gain a sense of identity and to be a part of a community. For young people of Middle Eastern parentage who were living in the UK, Europe, and the United States, their experience of being alienated and marginalized immigrant youth was overcome by the acceptance offered by ISIS. Initially, their main form of participation was through online chat rooms and Twitter feeds.

My own student research assistants have monitored these Twitter accounts and in the evidence that they uncovered, I found that the conversations were dominated by a sense of the importance of the cause, and the sharp we-they distinction between members of the movement's community and all outsiders, whether or not they were Muslim. A Canadian research scholar, Amarnath Amarsingam (2015), who has interacted with many young Canadian volunteers on Twitter, concurs that community is a dominant part of the appeal. Many of the Twitter activists called themselves members of the Baqiyah family, using the Arabic term for "enduring" that ISIS employed as one of hallmarks. "Trust me, I've never felt like I've belonged anywhere until I met the brothers and sisters on line," one young volunteer told Amarsingam. "The Internet keeps us connected, keeps us a family," he added. Then Amarsingam asked the young man to say more about the sense of belonging he felt in the Baqiyah family, and he responded saying that he felt more authentic as a person within the Internet community: "sometimes it's like the person on line is the real you."

Another Canadian research scholar, Marc-André Argentino (2016), who has also been monitoring ISIS-related Twitter accounts, agrees with Charlie Winter's (2015) analysis of the "Virtual Caliphate" that the category of "belonging" is one of the most important themes. "Regularly," Argentino reports, "images and video are published depicting brothers praying together and eating together, listening to sermons online, of brothers in arms hugging each other after combat operations, or huddled together hands in the middle (an image reminiscent of a sports team)" (2016). The pictures show the ISIS brotherhood together in physical space, but the sense of community appears to be almost as strong in the connections that I have found in the media of cyberspace.

For this reason, the cyber community of ISIS and the image of cosmic war that sustains it will likely persist long after the physical control of territory in Syria and Iraq has been abandoned. The digital apparatus of websites, cyber magazines, video uploads, Twitter communications, and dark web locations has been well established and though it may be interrupted by ISIS' territorial defeat, it likely will be maintained in some form somewhere in the

world other than in the formerly ISIS-controlled cities of Raqqa and Mosul. There is no reason to think that they will be entirely dismantled.

Indeed, to many of its far-flung followers, the passion of belonging to the ISIS cyber community has intensified in the period after the fall of its territorial control. Perhaps nothing brings together a community as the sense of being under siege and needing to band together for strength. In the Twitter feeds that I have seen in mid-2017, for instance, the postings were buzzing with comments about the assaults on Raqqa and Mosul, with rallying cries to defend the Caliphate.

One of the strategies employed by ISIS in its failing days was to use terrorist attacks against the far enemies of the movement—the countries of the United States, France, Turkey, and other nations regarded as being in league with those local forces that were trying to defeat the Islamic State. For this reason, messages went out for young followers around the world to undertake terrorist actions on their own wherever they were. An ISIS spokesman, Abu Mohammad al-Adnani, urged followers around the world to make the month of Ramadan in 2016 "a month of calamity everywhere".[3] Individuals were told that they did not need to check with ISIS headquarters in Raqqa but attack unbelievers in the name of ISIS wherever they were.

The attacks by ISIS sympathizers in Paris, Brussels, and Istanbul certainly seemed to be well coordinated multiple attacks of the sort that the ISIS central command would support and perhaps even help to plan. Attacks in the American cities of San Bernardino and Orlando appeared to be less well organized and conducted by one or two people inspired by ISIS ideology. The perpetrator of the Orlando attack, Omar Mateen, did exactly this—he declared his allegiance to the head of ISIS, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, by telephone to 911 emergency operators minutes into his rampage. He was said to have been surfing ISIS sites on line in the weeks before the attack. And the ISIS news agency quickly proclaimed him a "fighter for ISIS".[4]

The term "ISIS inspired," however, might not be quite fitting for the Orlando attack, and for some of the others as well, since "ISIS inspired" implies motives that were primarily related to an allegiance to the ideology of the Islamic State. It also implies that the primary intention of undertaking an act of terrorism is to carry out the broad directive of movement—in this case attacking unbelievers and enemies of the ISIS cause. There is some evidence that the perpetrator of the Orlando attacks, Omar Mateen, also had personal motives, and attacked a gay bar out of a homophobic rage. In this case, what we can say is that is acts were "ISIS branded," both by Mateen and by the ISIS leadership, whether or not it was directly inspired by ISIS ideology.[5]

This may be part of the dark future of the ISIS global jihadi network. The encouragement of ISIS for individuals to take up bomb attacks against secular and non-supportive Muslim societies leaves room for a plethora of acts of terrorism undertaken for mixed motives, in ad hoc activist ways. In many of these cases they are given the legitimization of ISIS ideology through indirect ISIS-branding. Individuals can be comforted by the fact that even though their horrible actions are condemned by most people, including most Muslims around the globe, their comrades in the online communities forged through Internet connections will digitally applaud their crimes.

---

[3] Adam Withnall, "ISIS Official Calls for 'Lone Wolf' Attacks on US and Europe During Ramadan," *Independent* (UK), May 22, 2016, http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/middle-east/isis-official-calls-for-lone-wolf-attacks-in-us-and-europe-during-ramadan-a7042296.html

[4] Jessie Hellman, "ISIS Takes Credit for Orlando Shooting," The Hill, June 12, 2016. http://thehill.com/blogs/blog-briefing-room/news/283203-isis-claims-credit-for-orlando-shootings

[5] See my essay "ISIS Inspired—or Branded?" (Juergensmeyer 2016c).

Hence, the situation with the world-wide jihadi following of ISIS is diametrically different than the Iraq and Syria-based Sunni tribal support. The Sunni tribal followers are realistic and adopt the cosmic war mentality only for convenience. For the global jihadi community, cosmic war is everything. Yet, although this group is largely impervious to political realities, this global network is sobered by the movement's loss of territory. The failures of the Islamic State on the ground does reveal a flaw in the image of glorious triumphant warfare, and the fact of it is sure to deter all but the most ardent supporters. The territorial collapse of ISIS reveals the fictitious nature of cosmic war to all but the true believers, who like the inner circle of the apocalyptic cult that provides the movement's leadership, hold even more tightly to their beliefs, since that is all they have.

ISIS as an Apocalyptic Cult
The reason why some of the foreign fighters are so passionate about the ISIS enterprise is that they are convinced that it is at the leading edge of a cosmic battle between good and evil that will usher in the last days of the planet and signal the arrival of the Islamic savior, the Mahdi. Though only some of the fighters are propelled by this belief, and few of the ordinary Sunnis in ISIS-controlled territory share it, this is a dominant motive of the inner circle of the movement.

This "ISIS apocalypse," as William McCants (2015) describes it in a perceptive book with that title, is a kind of extreme variant of Wahhabi Muslim apocalyptic thinking. Soon after the fiery leader of al Qaeda in Iraq, Abu Musab al- Zarqawi, was killed in 2006, his successor, Abu Ayyad al-Masri, turned to apocalyptic thinking to characterize the movement as the Caliphate that would emerge at the end times. He thought that the Mahdi would be coming soon and that the faithful had to act quickly to establish a Caliphate to receive him. His successor and self-proclaimed Caliph of the Islamic State, Abu Bakr al Baghdadi, shared that view. The name of the ISIS online magazine, *Dabiq*, referred to a town in northern Syria that was the location of the battle of Marj Dabiq between the Ottoman Empire and the Mamluk Sultanate in 1516. It was an ISIS belief that this town would be the location of the final battle between true believers and infidels that would usher in the apocalypse. For thatreason, the ISIS leadership battled hard to retain control over the town, and when it fell to Syrian government forces in 2016 they renamed their magazine. The new name is *Rumiyah,* which also has apocalyptic significance, since the forces from Rumiyah (Rome, and by extension all of Europe and the West) would attack the Muslim forces and be defeated in the final apocalyptic battle.

The strict code of behavior and extreme brutality in dealing with perceived enemies are aspects of the ISIS movement are grounded in some accounts of medieval Islamic history and practice. The relation between this kind of reign of terror and religion is problematic, however. One can claim that the ISIS policies are vicious because their religious understanding requires the faithful to act this way, or one can say that their need for an intimidating form of extreme violence needs to be justified, and they have found recourse in ancient tradition to do so. Either way it is an eerie relationship between religion and extreme violence.

Many have challenged whether ISIS should be called Islamic. Muslims around the world have risen up to protest against what they describe as the non-Muslim attitudes and actions of ISIS. Iyad Ameen Madani, the Secretary General of the Organization of Islamic Cooperation, a group that represents 57 countries and 1.4 billion Muslims, said ISIS "has nothing to do with

Islam and its principles."[6] Similar denunciations have come from leading Muslim clergy in Egypt, Turkey, and around the world.

Still, the leaders of ISIS claim Muslim authority for their actions, strict Shari'a law as the basis of their jurisprudence, and the promise of salvation for those recruited into its ranks. The religious credentials of al Baghdadi give some credibility to this religious appeal. He is a cleric whose family can claim ancestry to the family of the Prophet. He received a PhD in Islamic Studies from the Islamic University of Baghdad and knows the scriptures and the tradition of Islam better than most jihadists. Osama bin Laden had no religious credentials, and though he pretended to be an engineer, his college training was in business management; Ayman al Zawahiri was a medical doctor; and al Baghdadi's predecessor in leading al Qaeda in Iraq, Abu Musab al Zarqawi, was a street thug from Jordan. By contrast, al Baghdadi looks fairly legitimate. His credentials do not make the movement Islamic, however. Nor do the Islamic whitewashing of the regime's terrorist actions and cruel restrictions make them Muslim. The judgment is in the eye of the beholder. And to most Muslims, ISIS represents the antipathy of the faith (Gerges, McCants, Wood).

Still, every religious tradition has its peculiar extremists. Often these are marginal cults that communicate largely among themselves and do not surface to public attention unless they are involved in anomalous and bizarre behavior. The Heaven's Gate cult in the United States, for instance, believed that they would be taken up into outer space by UFOs in the last days of the world, a prophecy that was ignored by most people until they committed mass suicide in an attempt to collectively hasten their salvation. Similarly, it is quite possible that the apocalyptic ideas of cosmic war in ISIS ideology will live on in small cults that cherish these ideas but do not have the means nor the need to force them on others in a violent way.

The well-known case study that led to the book, *When Prophecy Fails,* may apply to the inner circle of the apocalyptic cult of ISIS (Festinger, Riecken, and Schachter [1956] 2009).[7] In this book, a social psychologist, Leon Festinger, and his colleagues in Chicago in the 1950s followed a small religious cult that believed that the world was about to end and flying saucers would land to rescue the faithful. When on the appointed day the world persisted and no flying saucers were to be seen, the group had an internal crisis. Several followers on the margin of the movement fell away, but the true believers at the core became even more devout in their faith, feeling that the failure was really a test of their faith, and they became even more certain of the ultimate veracity of their convictions.

Something of the same mentality might be holding the inner core of ISIS together even at the present moment when their territorial control is collapsing around them. One indication of this is the unwillingness to surrender, accepting a suicidal stance of resistance even in the face of massive opposition and the certainty of defeat. Those who survive, however, may linger on in remote outposts, nursing the loss of territorial ambitions but still clinging to the hope of ultimate triumph in a cosmic war.

The key question in the transformation of the inner circle of true believers in the ISIS apocalyptic ideas from a terrorist regime to a benign cult is whether the image of cosmic war can

---

[6] Saif Khalid, "Indian Muslims Protest Against Deadly ISIL Attacks," *Al Jazeera website,* November 19, 2015. http://www.aljazeera.com/news/2015/11/indian-muslims-protest-deadly-isil-attacks-151119104833285.html

[7] For a discussion of the Festinger thesis, see the essays in Stone, *Expecting Armageddon: Essential Readings in Failed Prophecy* (Stone 2013).

be contained. Once these images of cosmic war are applied to real situations of territorial struggle and guerilla warfare can they ever be put back in the metaphorical box? The history of extreme movements, such as the Moro Movement for Muslim Mindanao in the Philippines and the Khalistani movement of Sikhs in northern India that erupted into violence and then became quiescent, show that it is possible (Kreuzer and Werning, Singh). At the same time, some people within the movements have been convinced that the battles have to be conducted in real time and space in order to be a legitimate form of the cosmic war in which they believe. They have continued to plot schemes of attack, and occasionally conduct them in sporadic, uncoordinated terrorist assaults.

Hence ISIS, like the others, may end. It may lose its territorial control, and it may not be able to manage the entire communications infrastructure that made it for a time such an imposing force around the world. But aspects of it may remain in forms of Sunni empowerment and in small cells of true believers for whom cosmic war continues to be a reality. For the most part, these may be benign. But as recently history has aptly demonstrated, it does not take many activists with an extreme agenda and a willingness to lose their own lives in suicide assaults to do a horrendous degree of damage. Thus, the specter of ISIS may continue to haunt the world for some time to come.

The End of Imagined War
Under what conditions does cosmic war end? This is an interesting question not only from the point of view of social movement analysis, but from a policy perspective as well. The answer to the question may cause policy makers to alter the way in which they try to deal with movements that are swept up in visions of cosmic war.

The case of ISIS gives several possible answers. One is that they might collapse on their own. The image of cosmic war is a fantastic one, and as compelling as it may be for an intense period of time within a group of sympathetic followers, it may simply dissipate as time goes on and no measureable gains are seen, and as individuals at the margins of the movement drift off to other things. It is also true that the actions of the government through peaceful negotiation on the one hand and strong military action on the other, can played a significant role in the degradation of the movements and the collapse of the image of cosmic war.

To understand how this process happens, how the idea of cosmic war dissipates, we have to take both internal and external perspectives into account. The internal conditions include a *loss of divine sanctions,* when the noble purposes and religious justifications vanish, and the movement is discredited. It also includes *in-fighting,* when the movement divides and turns on itself and its paranoia turns inwards. The satanization of enemies turned towards perceived heretics and treason within their own ranks. As the troops drew the noose more tightly around the strongholds of Mosul and Raqqa the ISIS leaders went on a savage purge of those within its ranks it suspected to be collaborators with the enemy.

These divisions within the movement lead to several factors that cause the supporters of the movement to lose faith. A sense of *rising doubt* develops when marginal members become less convinced, and become weary of the infighting, the terror and war. This in turn leads to a *discredited leadership,* when the leader is seen as less than legitimate. In the case of ISIS, this is in part because of the incompetence of al Baghdadi and his generals, and the greed and hypocrisy of the leadership. Finally, the formerly loyal supporters abandon their support when they think that there are *alternative opportunities,* when combatants see opportunities for their roles in a non-war state, and there are viable alternatives to cosmic war. This is the great challenge for the

Sunni Arabs after the territorial fall of ISIS, to gain a feeling that there is an alternative to ISIS in providing a role for Sunni Arabs.

This is why the external conditions for ending cosmic war are equally important. By "external conditions," I mean largely the response of government authorities to the movement. One strategy for authorities to adopt is to do nothing, assuming that a movement will collapse by itself. It may not be a bad strategy, in that what authorities often do--the militarized overreactions to the threat of terrorism—can actually make matters worse, so in some cases they might have been better off having done nothing at all. Still, most authorities feel compelled to do something.

What they do, however, can have a significant impact on whether the movement and its image of cosmic war thrives or shrinks away. A movement of opposition to an authority is always highly conscious of what the authority does. How it responds to terrorism and the vision of cosmic war that propels it will determine how the movement thinks of itself and its relationship to the world view of the larger society of which it is a part. The governmental authority needs to maintain *strong limitations* on the activities of the movement, to provide a reality check on a vision of cosmic war, and show that this world view is not acceptable outside the narrow confines of the group that has a vision of cosmic war. Authorities also need to provide ways for the *accommodation and rehabilitation* of troops and leaders involved in defeated movement. Military force by itself is not sufficient to bring about an end to an image of cosmic war, since even a small use of armed force will be misconstrued as a hostile act from an evil enemy if it is not accompanied by other efforts of authorities to meet the concerns of the rebels and provide an alternative reality where the militants engaged in the movement can be accepted. Perhaps most important, the populace that previously supported the movement has to sense that it is receiving from the authorities an attitude of *respect and cultural acceptance.* This is perhaps the most difficult factor, since it requires a change of attitude from the authorities as well as from the militant rebels. In Iraq and Syria, it remains to be seen how Sunni Arab culture and leadership will be revered in a post-ISIS society. Military liberation is only part of the process of reintegration of the Arab Sunni population into the political life of those countries. A full acceptance into the political process will also be required. Failing that, the spirit of cosmic war with continue, and the conditions will be ripe for a renewal of militant encounter in the future.

Even after ISIS has ended as an entity with territorial control, the image of cosmic war will not easily be dispelled. It may, however, be neutralized by the acceptance of a multicultural society in which disaffected Sunni Arabs no longer feel like a marginal disrespected minority and thus no longer regard their opposition as cosmic enemies. A similar process of multicultural acceptance throughout the world may eventually diminish the appeal of an ISIS cosmic war in the minds of currently disaffected marginalized youth. Yet the images of cosmic war are likely to remain. They will continue in the form of religious language and legendary myth and apocalyptic visions of grand warfare at the end of days, perhaps someday to rise again.

References

Amarsingam, Amarnath. 2015. "What Twitter Really Means for Islamic State Supporters." *War on the Rocks* (an online news and commentary website). URL: https://warontherocks.com/2015/12/what-twitter-really-means-for-islamic-state-supporters/ (last accessed 6 September 2017).

Argentino*,* Marc-André. 2016. "Terrorism on the Internet: The Use of Social Media by the Islamic State" (unpublished paper).

Festinger, Leon, Henry Riecken, and Stanley Schachter. 2009 [1956]. *When Prophecy Fails.* New York: Martino Fine Books.

Gerges, Fawaz. 2017. *ISIS:A History.* Princeton: Princeton University Press.

Hegghammer, Thomas. 2017. *Jihadi Culture:The Art and Social Practices of Militant Islamists.* Cambridge UK: Cambridge University Press.

Juergensmeyer, Mark. 2016a. "Cosmic War." In *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Religion*. URL: http://religion.oxfordre.com/view/10.1093/acrefore/9780199340378.001.0001/acrefore-9780199340378-e-65 (last accessed 6 September 2017).

———. 2016b. "How ISIS Will End." *Cairo Review* 22:53–63.

———. 2016c. "ISIS Inspired—or Branded?" *Huffington Post*. URL: http://www.huffingtonpost.com/mark-juergensmeyer/isis-inspiredor-branded_b_10515398.html (last accessed 6 September 2017).

——— . 2017. *Terror in the Mind of God: The Global Rise of Religious Violence,* 4th ed. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.

Kreuzer, Peter, and Rainer Werning. 2014. *Conflict in Moro Land: Prospects for Peace.* Kuala Lampur: Penerbit USM Press.

William McCants, *The ISIS Apocalypse: The History, Strategy, and Doomsday Vision of the Islamic State*. New York: St Martin's Press, 2015.

Singh, Jagtar. 2011. *Khalistan Struggle: A Non Movement.* Delhi: Aakar Press.

Stern, Jessica, and J. M. Berger. 2016. *ISIS: The State of Terror.* New York: Ecco Books.

Stone, Jon (ed.). 2013. *Expecting Armageddon: Essential Readings in Failed Prophecy.* London: Routledge.

von Clausewitz, Carl. 1976 [1832]. *On War*, ed. Michael Howard and Peter Paret. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

Winter, Charlie. 2015. *The Virtual "Caliphate": Islamic State's Propaganda Strategy*. London: Quilliam Foundation.

Wood, Graeme. 2016. *The Way of the Strangers: Encounters with the Islamic State.* New York: Random House.