

How 'religious' are ISIS fighters? The relationship between religious literacy and religious motivation

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Editor's Note: As part of Brookings's [Rethinking Political Islam](#) project, we've asked a select group of outside scholars to react and respond to the overall project, in order to draw attention to potential blind spots, trends of note, and more.

One aspect of the emergence of Shariah, or Islamic law, into the forefront of public debate is that those trying to understand radicalization or more broadly the role of Islam in the public sphere have had to deal more seriously with the question of Islamic education and the role that specific belief structures—from Sufi to Salafi and everything in between—might play in somehow containing or shaping forms of Islamic practice.

This relates to the endless, and often frustrating, back-and-forth over whether or not ISIS is "really Islamic." One side of this debate has rightly noted that most of ISIS's foreign recruits are not religiously literate. Recent revelations of ISIS internal memoranda appear at first glance to support this assertion.

This mass disclosure of documents catalogs foreign recruits to the Islamic State, including in sometimes minute detail their personal information, past histories, and motivations for joining the fight. Thus far, it is largely [journalists](#) who have explored the documents, and they have done a good job of finding interesting information and aggregating initial trends. This is especially true when a journalist with deep experience and research skills like Yassin Musharbash goes in-depth with a [collection of 3,000 of these documents](#). One of the elements that Musharbash noted in his initial distillation is that a large majority of ISIS recruits rank their own knowledge of the Shariah as

"weak", and relatively few of these fighters seem to have advanced training in the Shariah.

Based on past debates about radicalization and the intersection between belief and jihadist recruitment, it seems likely that at least some observers will conclude from these documents that ISIS and its recruits are cynically using religion or that the phenomenon really has nothing to do with religion. However, such a conclusion would be unwarranted based on the evidence available, and takes a far too simplistic approach to understanding the complexity of the Shariah and Islamic knowledge in general.

The relative weakness of someone's knowledge of the Shariah does not necessarily say much about how religious they are or want to be. For one thing, a depth of knowledge of the Shariah is not particularly common for observant Muslims, and it is in many ways a construct of outsiders to think that it should be. The old Orientalist academic tradition was built around the close study of texts drafted by learned scholars (*'ulama*) or well-educated and highly literate Muslims concerned with in-depth issues of exegesis, interpretation, and more. Some of these scholars like Joseph Schacht focused on the study of the Shariah and component legal issues (*fiqh*), and placed it in many ways at the center of Islamic meaning and life.¹ More recently, although experts like Wael Hallaq have questioned these older understandings of the Shariah, they too have placed it at the center of constructions of morality and practice in pre-colonial societies. Hallaq describes the death of the "Shariah system" that accompanied colonialism as one of the reasons why a certain Islamic past and concept of statehood is simply irretrievable today.²

What these descriptions can elide in popular discussion is that deep study of the Shariah was never particularly common among the masses in the Muslim world, and was generally reserved for the *'ulama*, who devoted their lives to the study of these issues. Criticizing the depth of someone's religious feeling or even knowledge on the basis of their lack of knowledge of Shariah would be like questioning an American's sense of civic association because they didn't make their career as a lawyer. They might not know anything about the law, but there is much more to a sense of being American than just that. Similarly, religious belief and practice—even in more rigorist forms—is about far more than just the law. Academic debates have sometimes been slow to understand this, particularly when it comes to lazy descriptions of Sufism based on the supposed "mysticism" and lack of religious orthodoxy (however defined) of Sufis that ignores rigorous educational and interpretative training and histories of many Sufi leaders over the centuries.

¹ Joseph Schacht, *The Origins of Muhammedan Jurisprudence* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1967) 1.

² On the Shariah system and its demise, see Wael Hallaq, *Shari'a: Theory, Practice, Transformations* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009) 360-366, 500.

For ISIS recruits, a weak knowledge of the Shariah could mean many things. It could and does sometimes mean genuine ignorance of even basic religious precepts, but not always. People join militant movements for a variety of intersecting reasons, including belief, politics, economics, and more. Limited knowledge of an area of Islam traditionally left to dedicated experts says little about the contours of individual religious belief; if anything, it reflects our own projections onto others about modernity and education. Someone can be an ardent and even (dare I say) informed believer in the cause and justness of the Islamic State without having much knowledge of the Shariah. And the group is certainly happy to propagate its own interpretations through instruction and the dissemination of texts on the Shariah, but it is more than likely that the people joining the Islamic State were already inclined to support these interpretations.

Moreover, as Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood leader [Amr Darrag](#) argues in Brookings' Rethinking Political Islam project, one of the challenges for Western analysts in understanding Islamic movements is accepting the role of faith in shaping the actions of the movements' members. Faith is difficult to define and measure as an analytical category, and it is one reason why the early Orientalist scholars sought refuge in sources they could touch and see.

However, Darrag may overstate his arguments about faith when differentiating between organizations like the Muslim Brotherhood and ISIS. He suggests that "the chasm between the Muslim Brotherhood and those other groups is the Brotherhood's privileging of faith over utility while not discounting the latter, where other groups, such as ISIS, privilege utility over morality and faith while occasionally discounting the latter in the name of the former." Whether or not this is true from an institutional perspective, we should not discount the role that faith plays in motivating the decisions of ISIS recruits, a faith that may not be dependent on specific religious knowledge or that may actively discount certain interpretations over others, even if these recruits do not think highly of their own learning in the Shariah. Additionally, in discounting faith as a possible motivation for ISIS, Darrag makes the same mistake for which he critiques those writing about the Brotherhood, and assumes an instrumentalization of Islam for political ends while ignoring the possibility that the reverse might be true.

This point brings us to the question of countering recruitment to ISIS and similar organizations. Because of the perception that jihadist recruits were deficient in their knowledge of the "true" religion, a number of figures over the years, ranging from the King of Morocco to the Metropolitan Police's first head of the Muslim Contact Unit [Robert Lambert](#) to imams and lay Muslims, have argued that a major corrective

must come from better Islamic education from ostensibly moderate principles and backgrounds. There is nothing wrong with this argument per se, but it ignores several issues. For instance, recruits to jihadist groups may have thought about and rejected these "moderate" principles and systems of belief before joining, rather than joining because they were simply not aware of other interpretations. Additionally, American, European, and even ostensibly Muslim governments have to varying degrees sought to promote so-called moderates, potentially discrediting these Muslim leaders through their association with government programs.

Finally, these questions about Islamic education and regulating authority structures are far from apolitical. Even though leaders of Muslim countries and communities want to inhibit radicalism and violence, exerting control over religious structures and leaders also means exerting control over believers. Countries like Turkey, Algeria, and Morocco, for instance, have made efforts to take closer control of mosques and appoint pro-government imams partially under the guise of countering radicalization. Morocco has also increasingly framed itself as a counter-radicalization partner not just in Morocco and Europe, but in Sub-Saharan Africa as well. Whether or not these programs and initiatives are effective is a subject for another essay. But these initiatives not only further politicize Islamic education, training, and discourses; they also serve as foreign policy tools for governments to [reinforce their legitimacy abroad](#), further tempting Western governments to ignore issues like corruption and judicial abuses in favor of having strong partners against extremism.

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