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Al-Qaeda and Islamic State: searching humanity?

Introduction

In the so-called Western world, the view on terrorist movements such as Al- Qaeda and Islamic State[1] is deeply coined by its violence. Their actions certainly are violent, and it seems that especially Islamic State uses methodological savagery as an integral part of its strategy of war. However, it somehow feels dissatisfying to solely focus the analysis of these movements on the level of their violent behavior and what political aims they want to achieve with their acts of brutality.

One question that I will attempt to answer in this paper is if there is anything *beyond* violence that motivates these movements. The aim of this paper is twofold. It is first about understanding Al-Qaeda and its affiliated groups as a movement that goes beyond violence, and in this respect I will use Faisal Devji's work as a basis for such an understanding. In his works *Landscapes of Jihad*[2] and *The terrorist in search of humanity*[3], the latter building upon the former, Devji provides a novel and insightful theory that can greatly help us understand Al-Qaeda's goals and methods. His theory goes beyond the more obvious explanations of why modern Islamic terrorist movements purport a violent holy war, such as the idea of defending Islam and Muslim lands against the perceived attack of the 'West'. Rather, Devji argues, Al-Qaeda's militancy is driven by a form of global activism in which the personal is sacrificed for the defense of 'humanity'. Al-Qaeda's jihad should be seen as an 'ethical' practice, that creates a single landscape in which Islam becomes a global phenomenon. Part II of this paper will elaborate on this particular concept.

The second goal is to try and understand if Islamic State can relate to such a 'global' and 'ethical' movement, or in other words, if the Islamic State militant fits into Devji's concept of the Islamic militant that is 'in search of humanity'. This exercise will necessarily involve some improvisation, as it is simply

[1] Islamic State refers here to the group once known as the Islamic State of Iraq (2006-2013), the Islamic State of Iraq and Sham (2013 – June 2014) and the Islamic State (June 2014-present). During the period 2006-2013, the group became to be known in the West as Al-Qaeda in Iraq.
[2] F. Devji, *Landscapes of the Jihad* (Hurst and Company, London 2005)
[3] F. Devji, *The Terrorist in Search of Humanity* (Hurst and Company, London 2008)

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not very clear what Islamic State's ideology is – let alone if there is one. Neither do we know, and this goes for both Al-Qaeda and Islamic State, if the militants affiliated with these movements necessarily interpret their efforts through the movements' overarching goals and ideologies or whether individual political meaning can still be found in their acts of violence. Therefore, I strive for a discussion on a more theoretical and philosophical level, i.e. the level of Devji's works, to see if we can find any elements of commonality between Al-Qaeda and Islamic State. This will be done in part III.

However, before elaborating on Devji's concept and how Islamic State may relate to this, I will first provide a brief overview of the phenomenon of global jihad and to which religious affiliation Al-Qaeda and Islamic State belong.

Part I: On global jihad

Based on Rapoport's concept of "waves" of modern terrorism, we experience today the fourth wave, namely Islamic religious extremism built on the belief that the world has decayed into a greed and moral depravity, in particular failures in sexual purity, family values and the rule of the Word of God.[4] A revivalist ideology blames in particular 'Western' influence, with supposedly greed, materialism and sexual degradation of women, for corrupting the descendants of a virtuous religious community that originally lived in proximity to God. Salafi-jihadism can be placed under the banner of such a 'revivalist' ideology. It is a radical offshoot of a broader Islamist trend known as Salafism, although it also incorporates elements of Saudi Wahhabism and Qutbist factions of the Muslim Brotherhood.[5] Salafis adopt a strict implementation of Islamic law and belief that all man-made laws must be rejected as an interference with the word of God. They belief that only the *salaf* – the Prophet and his ancient companions – led a life-style and created a society that was in conformity with God's will and only by pursuing such a life-style can Muslims reverse the decline of Islam. Salafis see themselves as the only true Muslims and those who practice 'idolatry' are considered apostates. These include Shi'a, and for many Salafis, those participating in democratic systems as well. While 'ordinary' Salafis believe in a nonviolent call to spread God's word, Salafi-Jihadists advocate waging violent jihad. Some of them have

[4] Before, we had waves of anarchism, anti-colonialism and left-wing radicalism, see D.C. Rapoport, 'Four Waves of Modern Terrorism' in *Attacking Terrorism: Elements of a Grand Strategy*, A.K. Cronin, J.M. Ludes (eds.). (Washington DC: Georgetown University Press, 2004).

[5] The description of Salafi-jihadism is based on M. Sageman, *Leaderless Jihad* (University of Pennsylvania Press, 2008) and A. Moghadam, *The Globalization of Martyrdom* (John Hopkins University Press, 2008).

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set their eyes not only on the 'local' enemy, that is, apostate regimes in the Middle East that are under Western influence, but also on the 'far' enemy i.e. the West and in particular the US.[6]

As a distinct ideological movement in Sunni Islam, Salafi-jihadism encompasses by now a global networks of scholars, websites and, by now many supporters on social media. Although all Salafi-jihadist groups ground their belief on an extremist reading of Islamic scripture that is also textually rigorous, there are in fact many variants within Salafism and Salafi-jihadism, and this very brief overview is necessarily incomplete.[7] What is important for our cause is that both Al-Qaeda and Islamic State hold Salafi-jihadism, broadly speaking, as their guiding ideology. However, while Islamic State follows a more hardline orientation within this school, grounding Al-Qaeda's ideology as merely a traditional form of Salafi-Jihadism does not fully appreciate Al-Qaeda's ideological particularities, as we will see in the next part.

Part II: Al-Qaeda, global Islam and 'humanity'

In his works *Landscapes of Jihad* and *The terrorist in search of humanity*, Devji provides a novel and insightful theory that can help understand AQ's desires, goals and methods.[8] The thrust of his argument is that Al-Qaeda essentially represents an 'ethical' rather than a politically militant ideology. Al-Qaeda's attacks are meant as symbolic actions and should not be seen as strategic or political instruments since Al-Qaeda has no way of controlling the consequences of its actions.[9] The attacks then are a response to the politics of primarily the US, that Al-Qaeda holds responsible for a list of global wrongs and ethical faults, leading to the oppressive conditions faced by people throughout the Muslim world.

Devji places Al-Qaeda's jihad in a broader post-Cold War trend in which geography, citizenship and the State progressively become obsolete terms as globalization intensifies. Al-Qaeda is typical in this sense as it is a globalized organization that attempts to unite people from very diverse cultural and ideological backgrounds, people that furthermore take actions as individuals out of an ethical reasoning - indeed like other global movements such as environmentalism or antiglobalization.[10]

[6] See Sageman (n 5), p. 37-8.
[7] See Moghadam (n 5), chapter 3, for a more elaborate overview.
[8] See (n 2) and (n 3) for full reference.
[9] For example, AQ could neither control nor predict the global repercussions of 9/11, Devji (n 2), p. 4.
[10] The idea of jihad as an individual, ethical duty makes it in line with a tradition of holy war that was typical of charismatic, mystical and heretic movements, located at the peripheries of Islamic power and whose warriors (*ghazi*) were often members of Sufi fraternities. Landscapes of Sufism were dominated by images of caves, ruins and

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For Al-Qaeda, the attacks are then meant as a set of communications that can be understood by everyone, transcending cultural and geographical boundaries. Mass media is essential here as it allows for collective, global witnessing of martyrdom. Devji even poses that jihad can be seen as an "offspring of the media, composed almost completely of pre-existing media themes, images and stereotypes", from epic wars between rival principles to conspiracy theories of an almighty, technologically superior government force versus an underdog.[11] Martyrdom and suicide bombing are then part of the larger project to bring humans across the world to identify with Muslim suffering. The militant actions essentially 'mirror' the damaging actions of the West. And it is this 'collective suffering' of both Muslims and non-Muslims alike that underpins the dynamics of global militancy.

Further, territories are subordinated to a larger and even metaphysical struggle for which they have become instrumental, namely to provide a base for jihad and to rouse Muslims internationally. Islam itself also becomes a global entity and as such is part of a universal history that brings together Judaism, Christianity and Islam in one single space, or indeed one landscape.[12] In this landscape, the history of the West - from the crusades to European colonialism - is mirrored by its effects on the Muslim world - from the loss of Muslim Spain to the decline of the Ottoman Empire. Furthermore, the more traditional forms of Muslim authority are broken down in this landscape, fragmenting its traditional structures, making the conception of Islam profoundly individualistic. This is the chief impact of Al-Qaeda according to Devji. [13] It should then not come as a surprise that the traditional Islamic clerical and mystical groups strongly oppose this form of jihad, as they base their autonomy on very particular histories of interests and ideas.

Finally, Al-Qaeda subordinates the war of the US and its allies in Afghanistan and Iraq to the larger war of the "Crusader-Zionist alliance against Islam", creating effectively a metaphysical war between the three monotheist religions.[14] Jihad aims to win this war by making the jihad internal to the West, that is, by drawing the US into a war that is beyond its military potential. Jihad will bring the fall of the West from its position of metaphysical dominance, as the West is supposed to destroy itself by subverting civil liberties and human rights, the perceived basis of its success, to the cause of war. In the end, the monotheistic world must be subordinated to one authority that represents the jihad's vision of the future:

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wilderness, i.e. locations of disorder that stood in stark contrast to the completely architectonic landscape of a canonical Islam that is linked to political authority. See Devji (n 2), chapter 2.

[11] Devji (n 2), p. 88.

[12] Idem, p. 30.

[13] Idem, p. xvi.

[14] Idem, p. 74-5.

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the caliphate, a "cosmopolitan and pluralistic entity".[15] The caliphate should not be seen in the form of a political or geographical order, but rather as the future of the monotheist struggle in Muslim lands in which the mutual enmity of the three monotheistic faiths is transformed under the caliphate into a relationship of proximity.

Part III: Ideological tendencies of Al-Qaeda and Islamic State

The relationship between Al-Qaeda and Islamic State has only recently been mapped out, and a great deal of controversy remains.[16] The evolution of both movements and their relationship being outside the scope of this paper, the focus of this part is rather on elements of Islamic State's ideology and to what extent it fits within Devji's concept of the global, ethical militant movement, such as Al-Qaeda, as I have described above.

This part will be structured in two. First, we will stand still at the more apparent differences between the two movements, notably when it comes to the role of the Shi'a in the jihad, and that of restoring the caliphate. Second, we will elevate to a more philosophical level, i.e. the level of Devji's work, in order to find out to what extent Islamic State relates to Devji's 'humanitarian' movement. This forcibly leads to some improvisation, as the difficult thing here is that it is simply not clear what Islamic State's ideology consists of. Indeed, Devji has argued elsewhere that it is probably more appropriate to talk about Islamic State's "identity" since there seems to be no ideology.[17] For the sake of convenience and familiarity, I will continue to use the term ideology below.

i) Al-Qaeda disagreeing on ideological tenets of Islamic State

In his article on Islamic State's ideology, Bunzel recognizes two prominent ideological tenets of the movement: an extreme anti-Shi'ism and a focus on restoring the caliphate.[18] Al-Qaeda's leadership would from the start criticize Islamic State's sectarian views, and while Al-Qaeda in principle shared the desire to restore the caliphate, the strained relations between the two movements, especially from 2006 onwards,

[15] Devji (n 3), p. 100
[16] For on overview, see C. Bunzel, 'From Paper State to Caliphate: The ideology of the Islamic State', Brookings Center for Middle East Policy (No. 19, March 2015).
[17] F. Devji and J.B. Mohaghegh, 'Point of no return: extremism, sectarian violence, and the militant subject', JSCTIW Interlocutors Series, SCTIW Review, September 3, 2014.
[18] Bunzel (n 16), p. 13.

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would lead Al-Qaeda to have only minimal enthusiasm for the establishment of a state, even proposing a counter-caliph to the the self-proclaimed caliph Al-Baghdadi later on.[19]

In discussing Salafi-jihadism, Bunzel states:

> "If jihadism were to be placed on a political spectrum, Al-Qaeda would be its left and the IS its right. In principle, both groups adhere to Salafi theology and exemplify the increasingly Salafi character of the jihadi movement. But the IS does so with greater severity. In contrast with Al-Qaeda, it is absolutely uncompromising on doctrinal matters, prioritizing the promotion of an unforgiving strain of Salafi thought."[20]

The author bases this argument on the fact that the doctrinal concepts emphasized in Islamic State's texts and speeches are anchored in traditional Salafi literature and are applied in a highly dogmatic manner. These concepts include: all Muslims must associate exclusively with fellow "true" Muslims and dissociate from anyone not fitting this narrow definition; failure to rule in accordance with God's law constitutes unbelief; all Shi'a Muslims are apostates deserving of death.[21]

The Jordanian Abu Mus'ab al-Zarqawi, Islamic State's leader in the early days of the movement, believed that the Shi'a were cooperating with the Americans in order to seize power in Iraq. In a February 2004 letter to the Al-Qaeda leadership, he advocated attacking the Shi'a in order to spark a civil war and rally Sunnis to the cause of jihad in Iraq.[22] Further, throughout the years, Islamic State leaders have always emphasized in their texts and speeches their belief that the Shi'a have expansionist design in the Middle East, aiming at a "Shi'ite crescent" from the Islamic Republic of Iran to the Assad regime in Syria and Hezbollah in Lebanon.[23] Second in command of Al-Qaeda, Ayman al-Zawahiri, would criticize Zarqawi for targeting Shi'a, as he believed that the Shi'ite masses were making theological errors based on ignorance and are not necessarily infidels that are to be fought.[24]

[19] See W. McCants, 'Zawahiri's Counter-Caliphate', *War on the rocks,* 5 September 2014, URL: < http://warontherocks.com/2014/09/zawahiris-counter-caliphate/>
[20] Bunzel (n 16), p. 9.
[21] Idem, p. 10.
[22] See for the correct reference in Arabic, footnote 48 in Bunzel (n 16), p. 14. Similarly, in the next footnotes I will refer to Bunzel's work for the correct Arabic references.
[23] See fn 36 in Bunzel (n 16), p. 11.
[24] See fn 55 in Bunzel (n 16), p. 14.

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There are more indications that during the period 2006-2013, Al-Qaeda got tired of Islamic State's hardline ideology against the Shi'a, while the period 2013-2014 saw actual infighting and disagreement between the two camps on a wide variety of ideological issues.[25] As the debate intensified Al-Qaeda militants began emphasizing Islamic State's tendency towards extreme violence and *takfir* (labeling fellow Muslims as infidels), and on 2 February 2014 Al-Qaeda officially dissociated itself from IS.[26]

Zarqawi and the Al-Qaeda leadership found more common ground in establishing a caliphate in Iraq, discussing this project between 2004 and 2006. However, in the period between 2006 and 2013 the Al-Qaeda leadership showed only minimal enthusiasm for this project, most likely due to the limited communication and the strained relations that developed in general between the two movements. Al-Qaeda leaders were apparently appalled by the state of affairs of the in 2006 proclaimed 'Islamic State in Iraq'.[27] The 29 June 2014 declaration of the establishment of the caliphate was not only denounced by the AQ leadership, but AQ surprisingly also responded with a counter-caliph, declaring that Taliban leader Mullah Muhammad Umar is the true caliph of the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan since 1996.[28]

ii) Al-Qaeda and Islamic State: ethics or brutality?

Based on the former, we now know that Al-Qaeda and Islamic State disagreed to a significant extent on various issues. The first thing that comes to mind is Islamic State's focus and sheer hatred toward the Shi'a that does not seem in line with Devji's ethical militant, who wants to rally and unite *all* Muslims in order to fight a metaphysical war against the West. Second, the element of Islamic democratization and fragmentation that Devji's militant purports due to its global goals, and which is according to Devji Al-Qaeda's chief impact, features less in Islamic State's rhetoric. And the utopian caliphate that the ethical militant *ultimately* aims for seems to be different from the short-term efforts that Islamic States so vehemently undertakes to establish an actual state that can serve as a basis for territorial expansion.

The following part will reflect further on the extent to which Islamic State's ideology and actions fit within Devji's concept of the ethnical militant as outlined in part I above. I distinguish the following points. First, Al-Qaeda perceives its actions in a 'negative' sense while Islamic State acts positively. Second, like Al-Qaeda, Islamic State is a postmodern, efficient and fluid organization that transcends traditional boundaries, but paradoxically it also falls back on authoritarian forms of domination, such as

[25] See Bunzel (n 16), p. 25 onwards.
[26] Idem, p. 29.
[27] Idem, p. 22.
[28] See (n 19).

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law, state and sovereignty. Third, although violence goes beyond instrumentality for both Al-Qaeda and Islamic State, the excessive forms of violence deployed by Islamic State create unity and purpose for militants in the absence of any other commonalities.

a. On positively and negatively acting

Rather than justifying Al-Qaeda's actions as 'Islamic', bin Laden tended to describe them as mirror images of Western violence ('you do X so we do Y'). In this way, the militant brings to light the terrorism of his enemy, the West, but he also draws his own legitimacy and strength from this very rival. Like with a mirror, the militant exists *only* because his enemy exists and he disappears in his act of martyrdom, taking his victims with him. So when we discuss the Al-Qaeda militant, we could describe him as not having a positive form, i.e. he emanates from his enemy.

It seems that Islamic State does something quite different. In the first place, Islamic State does not use the language of mirrors and insists rather on identifying what it does differently, or indeed positively, with a strong and continuous emphasis on Islamic law. Islamic State has also positively acted to declare religious authority for itself, declaring first a state and then a caliphate in a specific territory. It seems that the caliphate Al-Qaeda aims for is a rather complex, utopian entity, one that forms the end-state of the metaphysical struggle between the monotheist religions. More generally speaking, Al-Qaeda has always made conscious efforts to globalize conflict on a meta-territorial basis. We could say then that Islamic State's positive occupation with the actual 'return' to the traditional forms of Islamist polity, setting up a state in a specific territory, is quite different than AQ's negative occupation of mirroring the acts of its enemies and as such aiming for a global landscape in which an Islamic caliphate will ultimately triumph.

b. On fluid and versatile vs authoritarian and totalitarian

Islamic State has organized itself as a highly efficient group that rapidly transformed into a self-financing organization, attracting fighters from all over the world. While commentators have dubbed Islamic State as "medieval", the mix of ruthless business enterprise, well-publicized savagery and transnational organized crime makes them in my opinion rather modern. We further witness very diverse but at the same time spectacular forms action, from launching assaults against the West by hacking social media networks, to the burning of enemy soldiers and to calls for the demolition of Mecca and its sacred artifacts. The point is that all of this gives Islamic State a certain fluidity and expansiveness, but also

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chaotic energy and volatility that we have not really witnessed before. It is perhaps this aspect that makes Islamic State so difficult to grasp.

In this respect, Islamic State can be actually interpreted as in line with Devji's concept of Al-Qaeda as a postmodern, decentralized organization that traverses all previous borders including those of nations, cultures and languages, and that employs very novel methods to achieve an ideological goal. Similarities are also obvious when we talk about the movements' role in global media, with both Al-Qaeda and Islamic State having become world-famous media-produced entities.

On the other hand, paradoxically, we can observe the authoritarian tactics of Islamic State and their claims to absolutist forms of domination, such as the establishment of a state, the stress on the Islamic codification of law, and the subsequent merciless eradication of dissidents. So the former point on the fluid and versatile forms Islamic State takes in some aspects is countered by the fact that it falls back on traditional and despotic structures of authoritarianism, state and law in other aspects, which differs from Al-Qaeda.

c. On violence

Ever since it existed, Islamic State has made clear its commitment to beheading apostates and unbelievers, enslaving women and wiping out communities that will not submit to its interpretation of Islam. It seems clear that Islamic State practices methodical savagery as an integral part of its strategy of war. But is there not more that can explain the truly excessive forms of violence that are repeated over and over again, and that receive, as Devji notes elsewhere, the name of the law almost arbitrarily?[29]

In my discussion of Devji's work it became clear that Al-Qaeda thinks *beyond* the political instrumentality of their acts and that the true nature of the act is symbolic or ethical, i.e. mirroring or putting everyone, both citizens of the West and the suppressed Muslims, in a relationship of intimacy. Devji has argued elsewhere that there is more beyond the instrumentality of the violent practices of Islamic State as well. The violent acts can be seen as rituals that give the group some sense of unity and purpose. In his own words:

> "The rituals of violence […] are endowed with little or no scriptural justification, and are meant, rather, to display a unity and purpose at the level of practice alone. For by being named and thus

[29] Devji and Mohaghegh (n 17), p. 4.

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deprived of its old-fashioned excessiveness as something secret or disavowed, power here is stripped of sovereignty in some fundamental way."[30]

His point is that even though we may perceive the setting up of a state as conventional, with power and law in the hands of the sovereign, Islamic State's rituals of violence are so excessive and receive the name of law so easily that its violence comes to possess its own rationality and is no longer tied to the sovereign. He also notes that the foreign fighters, such as the European Muslims who have joined the ranks of Islamic State, reject their societies of birth and residence to assume a new Islamic State-style identity that is so abstract, so that the exercise of extreme violence is "a necessary act in self-making".[31] This could also mean that Islamic State is ideologically speaking very shallow. It attracts its followers by fan-logic and not in the traditional way with the use of ideological schooling. As I said before, Islamic State has become a media-sensation and its appeal lies perhaps in their open hatred against their enemies and their animalistic brutality rather than their ideological profoundness.

Based on the former, we can say that there are some crucial differences in how the Al-Qaeda militant and the Islamic State militant perceive their actions. While the former seems to act out of a serious, profound or ethical drive in order to place attacker and victim, Muslim and non-Muslim in an intimate relationship with each other, the Islamic State militant engages in violence, almost untouched, in order to *become one-self,* to find purpose and unity with a group in an utterly chaotic and instable landscape.

Concluding remarks

This paper was an exercise in better understanding what Al-Qaeda and Islamic State's ideologies stand for. Devji's concept of Al-Qaeda's ethical militant, part of a postmodern organization that is engaged in a form of global activism has provided a useful role, although we should take into account the counter-argument that not *all* militants are necessarily on the same level here and share the overarching ideals. By comparing this militant with the one of Islamic state, and by more generally analyzing Islamic State's practices and ideology, we figured out that there are important differences between the movements, notably when it comes to Islamic State's positive efforts to 'return' to a neo-traditionalist Islamist polity, its state-building exercise that involves totalitarian forms of domination, and the different meaning of violence. While Al-Qaeda and Islamic State share some common ground in their fluid, postmodern forms of organization and their shared hatred towards the West, it seems difficult to recognize the worldly

[30] Idem, p. 5.
[31] Idem, p. 8.

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concerns of the Al-Qaeda militant in the young, brutal Islamic State jihadist. I would therefore like to end by repeating Devji's words, which so well sketch this particular difference:

> "What interests me about ISIS […] is that the very thing that makes its members so cruel in the instantiation of a jihadi subjectivity might also allow them to shift out of it at a moment's notice, as security specialists haven't failed to notice. In other words, the "superficial" or externalized nature of their performance of selfhood is what appears to permit these men to remain so detached from its consequences. Why else do we see video clips of them smiling and laughing as they blow up bound prisoners in an abandoned jail, rather than looking serious and profound like the terrorists of old did? It is not simply the disregard for life that is crucial here, but a sense of being untouched by and distanced from one's own actions, as if playing some particularly grotesque part in a piece of theatre, which is after all what these clips are about."[32]

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[32] Devji and Mohaghegh (n 17), p. 13.

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