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Beyond the Black Flag: Modernism, Ideology, and the Rise of ISIS

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Abstract:

ISIS is not just the "new face" of Salafi jihadism. It is a new breed of extremism, with elements from previous fundamentalist movements but also with an infusion of both modernist and post-colonial influences that make it more properly understood as a "reactionary modernist" movement. The failure to properly conceptualize it as such is a retardant on our ability to properly understand this group. This attempt to correct this misunderstanding is thus of extraordinary necessity.

Additionally, the implications of ISIS's rise run deeper that is commonly realized. The same factors that gave birth to ISIS are likely to manifest themselves in different forms across the world over the next few decades. These conditions will be fertile soil for the rise of other reactionary modernist organizations, and so the necessity of understanding this unique type of movement is essentially to understanding what the landscape of the future will look like in years to come.

Finally, the concept of "reactionary modernism" itself shall be critiqued, and a deeper, more insightful classification will be attempted. The final conclusion is that ISIS constitutes a form of "Cyberpunk Dark Romanticism", a tech-savvy movement rebelling against established social orders and infused with a heavy emphasis on sin and death and the end of the world.

Introduction

In June of 2014, the Islamist group ISIS roared onto the global scene by making a series of massive and unexpected territorial grabs across western Syria and Northern Iraq. This initiative, seemingly tailor-made for the 24-hour news cycle, was further bolstered by the dramatic way in which the Iraqi Army melted away and fled before them. It was an earth-shattering moment, one that was trumpeted by the media in news headlines and on television screens across the United States.

What made this spectacle even more dramatic was the utter lack of knowledge we had about this group. Who were they? What did they want? Where did they come from? Answers were few and far between.

Though few are willing to admit it, we still know very little about this group. We have a basic idea of their command structure, but little more. We have no idea how many fighters they have under their command, only guesses that change by the day. We have no idea how far they are willing to go in pursuit of their goals, nor do we have any idea how we far we would have to go if we sought to stop them.

This thesis will not attempt to answer all of the above questions, although it will touch on them. Its primary intention, however, is to attempt to classify and categorize this movement, as well as provide some historical context for its rise.

Overview

The dramatic burst of the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS; more recently the Islamic State or IS) onto the global stage in the summer of 2014 might not necessarily have heralded the arrival of a new age in international relations and geopolitical studies, but it arguably marked the

beginning of a paradigm shift in the way we perceive so-called "fundamentalist" movements and their impact on the world at large. The understanding of the Islamic State (IS) as a "fundamentalist" — and even a "terrorist" — movement is, I argue, a miscategorization of the nature of this phenomenon. While ISIS shares certain similarities with previous Islamist movements (which is understandable, given its origin as part of the Al-Qaeda in Iraq organization), to label it simply as the "new face" of Islamic extremism is to miss much of what makes ISIS so unique.

One can posit that IS is best described as a new variety of what Jeffrey Herf has described as a "reactionary modernist" movement, one that combines "a great enthusiasm for modern technology with a rejection of the Enlightenment and the values and institutions of Liberal Democracy".[1] Clearly, ISIS, with its use of contemporary weaponry, social media savvy and its preference for a form of political organization with origins in the seventh-century CE (i.e., the earliest Islamic caliphate), fits this description exceedingly well. Comparisons to other reactionary modernist movements will be included in this thesis, as they are instrumental to comprehending this organization's origins, ideas, methods, activities, and goals. Finally, the example of ISIS will be used to critically examine the idea of reactionary modernism in response to certain issues that will arise over the course of this thesis.

What led to the rise of ISIS? This thesis proposes that the imposition of western ideals (specifically, secular, liberal democracy) by military force on certain countries in the region led inexorably to a backlash. This situation was further exacerbated by the effective alienation of Iraqi Sunni Arabs from that country's political life after the American attempt to create a secular democracy had unforeseen sectarian consequences. This simmering cauldron of discontent was made even more volatile by the proliferation of Sunni rebel groups in the fighting of the Syrian civil war—groups which seem to have been increasingly radicalized by virtue of Syrian President Assad's aggressive response to the rebels. The situation created a vacuum that was

filled by a new kind of reactionary ideology, and a Syrian rebel group known as the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (the future "Islamic State") stepped into that void when it began storming across the plains of northern Iraq. I argue that this opportunity emerged as a result of the US attempt to establish imperialistic control over the region (and its subsequent pull-out), and can thus be described as a "post-colonial" phenomenon. Accordingly, this project will examine ISIS not only as a reactionary modernist organization, but also a post-colonial one. Additionally, the very conception of reactionary modernism as a concept will itself be critiqued.

Finally, this thesis posits that not only is ISIS both reactionary and post-colonial, but that it is reactionary *because* it is post-colonial, and that in an a world that is still becoming more post-colonial (as the last vestiges of the old empires continue to recede and the US slowly pulls back from its postwar role as world hegemon), more and more opportunities will present themselves for reactionary modernist movements like ISIS to appear.

Section I: Reactionary Modernism and its (Dis)contents

What is Reactionary Modernism?

Before diving into an analysis of ISIS, however, we must first understand the concept of *reactionary modernism*, so that we might have some idea of why this is the proper categorization for the self-proclaimed Caliphate.

The term "Reactionary Modernism" was coined by the scholar Jeffrey Herf as a way of describing organizations that outright reject Western Enlightenment ideals (especially the values and structures of liberal democracy) while relying on modern technology and modern forms of organization. Herf initially developed the term as a way of conceptualizing what seemed to be

some of the more paradoxical elements of National Socialism, though he now uses the term to describe the rule of the Ayatollahs in Iran as well.[2]

Of course, it could be argued that Reactionary Modernism is not in fact a reaction *against* modernism, but rather a unique strain of it. Implicit in it is not only the rebellion against modernity (in itself a highly modernist idea that could only have arisen in the modernist self-reflection on modernity), but also a heavy reliance on modernist assumptions and precepts (such as legitimacy by means of democratic principles and the appeal to propaganda to influence people's perceptions of it).

Because of this, forms of Reactionary Modernism are no less modern than another other "modernist" ideas. There is no particular reason why reactionary modernism should not continue to grow and develop in the future, and indeed, there is some reason to suspect why this might be the case, a point that we will return to later on.

In order to better illustrate some of the concepts that underlie reactionary modernism, we will now take a quick look at two examples of the phenomenon.

National Socialism

The National Socialist Movement in Germany in the early twentieth century provides the *locus classicus* of reactionary modernism, if for no other reason than that it was the focal point of Herf's early inquiries when seeking to develop the concept. As we might expect, the case of Nazism provides a worthy starting point for our discussion of reactionary modernism.

The best way to demonstrate that National Socialism was a mix of both reactionary ideas and modernist ones is to list the key elements that made up their ideology and briefly discuss how each of these ideas are either reactionary and/or modernist in scope.

One of the key elements of Nazi ideology was a type of ultra-nationalism as a means to German reinvigoration. This is particularly interesting for our examination of reactionary modernism, for nationalism is a highly modernist idea, one that arose on the eighteenth century as an accompaniment to the emergence of the nation-state as the dominant form of European political organization.

However, German nationalism itself was of a peculiar strain. Rooted in the German romantic movement, it was strongly infused with anti-Enlightenment ideals[3] (it bears repeating here that German Romanticism was in many ways a reaction to the ideas of the Enlightenment). Though it was used by the Nazis as a means to facilitate the type of mass societal mobilization that would become instrumental to the waging of war in the twentieth century, we cannot forget that at the heart of German nationalism was a romantic, irrational, anti-Enlightenment core. This ideological core demonstrates a key aspect of modernism, which is that of being driven by ideology. This odd synthesis of reactionary ideals being utilized for modernist purposes is reactionary modernism in a nutshell, just a smaller and more focused manifestation of it.

This alone is sufficient to demonstrate the reactionary modernism of the National Socialist movement, but for the purposes of elucidating the unique tension in this unique ideological category, some brief further examples will be given.

Another aspect of National Socialist thought that is worth mentioning is the egalitarian "attempt" by the Nazis that was somewhat restricted in application. The egalitarian aspect comes from an attempt to create an in-group that was purely German in nature (the German word for this, one that predated the Nazis, was *volksgemeinschaft).* Nazi appeals to *volksgemeinschaft* claimed that this ideal of German unity overpowered previous class or social distinction.[4] It is hard to argue that this egalitarian impulse does not assume an implicitly modernist idea of human equality. Indeed, the idea of humanity as being composed of individuals of equal worth is one of

the key ideas underlying modernist thought, and it is one of the ideas that is most frequently appealed to (even if it is not always held up so well in practice).

This egalitarianism is of course, arguably countermanded by the strict racial hierarchy that the Nazis subscribed to, which was was perhaps the single most reactionary idea that was incorporated into the ideological make-up of National Socialism. Whatever the Nazis might have thought about the equality of Germans within the *volksgemeinschaft*, they had extraordinarily inegalitarian ideas regarding individuals not a part of the "Aryan" ethnos. The Nazis subscribed to a strict racial hierarchy that was anything but egalitarian. They believed that the differences among human races were significant (an idea which itself was heavily influenced by an ideology — that of of social Darwinism — which was itself a modern idea), and that these differences naturally made some races better or worse than others. Their ideology proposed that the German people were part of the "Aryan" race, which just so happened to be the greatest and most supreme of all races. It is interesting to note that this ideology was one that sought to look to the past and return to an ideal state of affairs that had existed long ago, an especially Romantic notion.

This racial hierarchy was essential to the National Socialist project, which was to take socialist ideals (which, at that time, were international in ambition), and move them from a universalist scope to a more narrow, nationalist one. In short, the Nazis were attempting to take an ideology soaked in universalism (a key modernist conceit) and transmute it into an ideology that could be used for nationalist revival. To this end, it developed the reactionary ideology of fascism, with its militaristic, ultra-nationalist ideals. Once again, we see the synthesis of the reactionary and the modern to create that unique blend of ideas that gives birth to a reactionary modernist ideology.

Finally, it is worth noting that the Nazis, despite their anti-Enlightenment ideals, relied heavily not just on the most cutting-edge material technology and the most advanced military

tactics of the age, but also on social technology that would not have been possible without the development of Enlightenment ideals. Though the Nazi regime was secured in the later years of their *Reich* due to *de facto* one-party rule, it must not be forgotten that the Nazis came to power through democratic elections, an implicit submission to the supremacy of a particular modernist form of government. Additionally, their usage of and reliance on propaganda was to be one of the first stirrings of a great hallmark of the modern era.

Usage of propaganda by the Nazis was the use of a modern tool of societal mobilization in order to promote their ideas, and it should be noted that propaganda requires ideas to be spread, and is most often used to promote an ideology. Once again, we see the reactionary and the modern combine in one.

It is not only the Nazis that could be categorized as "Reactionary Modernist", however. In the next section, we shall examine an example more close to our present time.

Iran

The case of Iran is perhaps an even more fitting example for our purposes here. In name, it is the Islamic Republic of Iran. In practice, the government combines elements of a religious theocracy (a style of government rejected by the Enlightenment project) with a parliamentary democracy (a very modernist form of government).

Unlike the Nazis, who came to power by working within the established political order (initially, at least, before then altering that order to fit their purposes), the Ayatollahs came to power in Iran on the back of a popular overthrow of the monarchist regime. It is worth bearing in mind that mobilizing the masses and claiming legitimacy on the basis of popular support is an exceedingly modernist (and thoroughly Enlightenment-based) way of acquiring power, one with a pedigree going back to at least the French Revolution and arguably the American Revolution.

This demonstrates the core modernist bent of the Iranian Revolution and the modernist assumptions that it rests upon.

The main push of the Ayatollah Khomeini was to use the structure and apparatus of a modern society to promote the development of an Islamic society, one based on popular support and standing firmly in opposition to the former regime of the Shah. This was done as a reaction to the rule of the Shah, and it demonstrates the inviolable essence (if there is one) of reactionary modernism.

The Iranian state is very much a modern state, and the Ayatollahs have not attempted to build a system of government more in line with the 8th Century (like, say, a Caliphate). Instead, they have developed a country that is arguably more democratic than most countries in the Middle East and that, despite being the subject of numerous international sanctions, has managed to build a functional economy and modern way of life.

Additionally, one of the main initiatives that was undertaken by the Ayatollahs was to initiate the breakdown in separation between the state and civil society (and what, historically, could be conceived of as the civil society, a key separation that had always been emphasized in the medieval rule of the Caliphs).[5] The historic state (broadly, the organs of government) confined themselves to the realms of the military and of foreign affairs, with some brief incursions onto certain areas of commerce. The modern Iranian state does not restrict itself in the same way, and it engages in the same types of activities as many other modern governments, such as operating a central bank, running state television channels, and promoting higher education and scientific research.

Initiatives such as these are classical characteristics of modern governments. Thus, while an initial reading of the idea that the state and civil society should not be separated might seem reactionary (in light of the views of the Iranian leadership), it actually belies an implicitly modernist understanding of the role of government in a developed society. This understanding

also drives much of the social policy in western countries, which should constitute additional proof that, far from being a reactionary impulse, is actually a deeply modernist one.

We ought to also make brief comment on the Iranian government itself. Though often described as a reactionary theocracy, this isn't quite the case. It may seem reactionary, but it is not in any way an attempt to revert to an earlier political system. Rather, the Iranian government in its current form was conceived of and devised by Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini.

One of the mains thrusts of the Iranian Leadership is the idea of *Velayat-e Faqih*,[6] which serves as rationalization for the rule of the Supreme Leader. It upholds that the right to rule belongs not to Kings, but to the clerics, and that they have the divine right to rule over the people. Indeed, they not just have the right to rule, but they are responsible for the people and have it as their duty to watch over them.

This principle in mind, the structure of the Iranian government is set up so that although the Supreme Leader is the head of state, and he holds veto power over the laws of parliament and has the right to approve presidential candidates, he generally deigns to allow Iran's secular elements to deal with the everyday politicking of the other branches of government: the President, who is the nominal head of the government and is given responsibility for upholding the constitution and carrying out executive functions, and the Parliament, which drafts legislation and ratifies international treaties.

This fusion of modernist principles and reactionary ideas is one of the key characteristics of reactionary modernism. It should be clear at this point that the Iranian Leadership fits the definition of reactionary modernism almost as snugly as the Nazis did.

Core Themes of Reactionary Modernism

One of the themes that should be noted is that reactionary modernists are very much modernists. They are not Luddites, nor do they seek to take society back to a previous time *per se* (though appeals to previous times are often a major part of reactionary modernist rhetoric). Rather, they are very much creatures of modernity who synthesize reactionary ideas with modernist assumptions and instruments.

Another thing to note is that sometimes, in analyzing the ideologies of reactionary modernist movements, it can sometimes be hard to tell when the reactionary ends and the modernist begins. This is especially true in cases when they conceive new ideas that seem reactionary (*Velayat-e faqih*) or when they appropriate already existing ideas in order to repurpose them for their own ends (*volksgemeinschaft*).

As we have seen, reactionary modernism often seems paradoxical in nature. This is, of course, something to be expected in any ideological tradition that seeks to reconcile ideas coming from vastly different places (such as theological rule by clerics and parliamentary democracy).

What is interesting is that these paradoxes, rather than hamstringing these ideologies, seem to enervate them. It almost seems as if the tensions give a type of strength and energy to these ideologies, fueling them and driving them forward (consider, perhaps, the fusion of German Romanticism with democratic organization in the case of the Nazis[*]). Perhaps this is because the surface contradictions of reactionary modernist movements drive away all but the most zealous followers, leaving only those who will do anything for the movement. Yet, this does not seem to be a satisfactory explanation. It seems there is something deeper at work here, something that cannot be so easily dismissed (and thus, neither can reactionary modernist movements).

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[*] It should be noted that though there is certainly a Romantic influence in 20th Century German Reactionary Modernism, National Socialism was not an inevitable consequence of German Romanticism, and that Romanticism greatly influenced many subsequent schools of thought: liberal and illiberal, right-wing and left-wing, authoritarian and anti-authoritarian.

Additionally, we must remember that reactionary modernism is not necessarily maladapted for a modern context, and indeed, it might even be well-adapted depending on the circumstances. The reactionary flavor of a reactionary modernist movement does not necessarily consign it to inevitable failure. One of the things we should bear in mind about reactionary modernist movements is that they tend towards a much higher degree of success than is expected of them. Might this be a reflection not of a characteristic of reactionary modernism, but of modernism in general?

With all this in mind, let us now turn our gaze to the main subject of this thesis.

Section II: The Islamic State

History of the Islamic State

The organization that we now know as the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria began as a part of the al-Qaeda in Iraq organization that fought against US forces stationed in Iraq following the US-led invasion of that country in 2003 and the ousting of the dictator Saddam Hussein. Al-Qaeda in Iraq (AQI) used many of the same tactics that have characterized other Islamist groups, including suicide bombings and IEDs (improvised explosive devices) in attacks on American troops in the region.[7]

Much of what we have now come to associate with ISIS began with elements of AQI, including the attempt to impose Sharia law in regions that it controlled, tensions with the broader al-Qaeda organization, and the idea to establish a caliphate.[8]

Most genealogies of ISIS argue that the next stage of its development came in 2006, when AQI came together with several other jihadi organizations to form the Islamic State of Iraq, an attempt to exert and formalize control over Sunni-majority areas in the western provinces of

Iraq.[9] The Islamic State of Iraq (ISI) also gave special importance, among other things, to the city of Mosul, one of Iraq's largest cities, a focus which is made noteworthy in light of the capture of that city by ISIS in 2014.

This attempt did not go unnoticed, and after the US "Surge" in 2007 (a move designed to destroy Al-Qaeda in Iraq once and for all) a significant effort was devoted to crushing this nascent attempt to exert Islamist control over Iraqi territory. The next few years witnessed a severe degradation in the capacity of ISI to combat US forces and to exert influences over their "territories".

Despite the US effort to hunt down and eliminate every last vestige of AQI, the organization survived, and it endured until the final US troops left Iraq in December 2011. The organization had been significantly weakened, but it had not been eliminated entirely, and new developments in the region were about to give it a whole new lease on life.

The US withdrawal from Iraq was not the only major occurrence that would impact events in the region in 2011. That year also saw massive protests and demonstrations in numerous Arab countries in a series of events now known as the "Arab Spring". These protests, which began in Tunisia as a backlash against police corruption and heavy-handed authoritarian treatment by the government, soon spread to other countries in North Africa and the Middle East. The question of why these protests spread to so many other countries remains a topic of debate, with the most common explanations focusing generally on economic factors (such as food prices and youth unemployment) and/or political ones (such as the desire for political empowerment and an opposition to authoritarian policies).

Responses to these protests varied from country to country. In certain countries, demonstrations were comparatively minor and governments acted in an acquiescent manner, granting certain concessions and attempting to reform in such a way as to appease the protesters. Many countries opted to use a certain level of force in an attempt to forcibly disperse the

protests, though it should perhaps be noted that this did not necessarily preclude them from granting certain concessions to the protestors as well.

In some countries, however, attempts to crack down on protesters met with violent backlash. This backlash was then met with increased levels of government violence, which then precipitated further escalation from the protests in a cycle which eventually resulted in civil war.

With the possible exception of Libya, there is no country in which this dynamic manifested itself more strongly than in Syria. Syria, which had been under the rule of President Bashar Al-Assad since 2000, was one of the later countries to become embroiled in the Arab Spring, with demonstrations only emerging in any number in March 2011, four months after protests began in Tunisia and one month after the ouster of Egyptian president Hosni Mubarak. The call for political reforms resulted in the largest protests seen in Syria in decades. By mid-April, there were reportedly as many as 100,000 people protesting in the city of Homs, calling for President Assad to step down.

The Syrian government responded to these protests by attempting to clamp down and forcibly suppress them. These attempts were unsuccessful. The Syrian government doubled down on this approach, and the Syrian Army was called in to violently crush any further protests. This initiative was unsuccessful, and each attempt to suppress the protests led only to further demonstrations.

By the end of the summer, the brutal tactics of the Syrian Army had amassed such a death toll and stirred up such resentment that many Syrians had begun engaging in armed resistance. Various rebel groups began to form, many of which included deserters from the Syrian Army. As one would expect, this vivid patchwork of disparate and often uncoordinated rebel groups furthered the proliferation of chaos in the country.

This descent into chaos did not go unnoticed by ISI. The then-leader of ISI, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, a (supposed) Islamic scholar and (believed) former US detainee who is thought to

have been running the ISI organization since 2010, began sending ISI fighters across the Iraq-Syria border in order to establish a presence in Syria.[10] In the chaos of the Syrian Civil War, in which rebels groups were not only fighting Assad's forces, but also each other, there was much fertile ground in which to grow armed militias, and ISI soon found itself with loyal cells operating in the region.

Details on the next few years are hard to tease out, as various sources tend more towards contradiction than consensus on the matter. What seems to be the case is that in 2013, after various jihadi groups had established a presence in Syria, ISI claimed to have been the ones who established and financed the Syrian rebel group Al-Nusra, a jihadi organization that claimed affiliation to Al-Qaeda. ISI went on to declare that because of this support, it had the right to declare a merger of ISI and Al-Nusra. It then proceeded to declare such a merger, naming the newly-formed organization *ad-Dawlah al-Islāmīyah fī al-'Irāq wash-Shām,* a name which can be translated as both "The Islamic State of Iraq and Syria" (ISIS) and "The Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant" (ISIL).[11]

The move seems to have taken all other by surprise, and the announcement caused a certain degree of consternation. Al-Nusra deemed it a "surprise", and the Al-Nusra leadership said that no merger would be happen. Al-Qaeda appears to have been equally surprised, and it made an announcement condemning the move.

ISI, unperturbed, began acting as if Al-Nusra was now a part of ISIL. Al-Nusra, unwilling to go along with this, soon found itself engaging in armed skirmishes with ISIL (it is not clear which side began shooting first). The Al-Qaeda leadership, desperate to ease tensions, sent an envoy to work out some sort of settlement between the two groups. ISI (now calling itself ISIS) promptly declared that the merger was going forward as planned.

Negotiations eventually fell through. As a result of this, Al-Qaeda formally called on ISIS to disband itself. It also officially declared Al-Nusra to be in charge of fighting the Islamist

fight in Syria. ISIS responded by ignoring Al-Qaeda's demands and killing their emissary.[12] Al-Qaeda and Al-Nusra, in response to these actions, disavowed all relationship with ISIS in February 2014.

What propelled ISIS to global recognition, however, was not these inter-jihadi conflicts, but the major offensive they launched against Iraq in June 2014, when they poured over the border into northern Iraq. The speed with which they gained ground, the rapid succession of quick victories they accumulated (included their dramatic seizure of the city of Mosul), and the shocking way in which the Iraqi army melted before them came together to function as a kind of dark apotheosis for the group, leaving them not only the world's richest terrorist organization,[13] but also its most feared.

The history past this point is much more extensively documented. ISIS made rapid gains in the north of Iraq before stalling significantly. Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi declared ISIS to be a Caliphate and himself the Caliph, as well as claiming authority over all Muslims worldwide (a claim that has unsurprisingly been challenged and/or gone unheeded by the vast majority of the world's Muslims). In the succeeding months, the group has engaged in various high-profile acts such as blowing up dams, imposing Sharia law on captured territories, attempting genocide of Shia Muslims as well as various minorities, including Kurds, Yazidis, and Christians, and killing foreign hostages in all manner of gruesome ways.[*] Attempts to form any sort of international coalition to combat this organization have been slow-going at best, and the group encourages Muslims who share their vision to commit acts of terror around the world, a call which seems to have met with some success.

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[*] Two of the more notable ways in which ISIS has chosen to kill hostages have been decapitation and, in at least one case, immolation. Decapitation, arguably, has some precedent in Islam (i.e. Verse 4 of Sura 47 of the Quran can be translated as ""When you meet the unbelievers in the battlefield strike off their heads", though the author would like to note that his personal copy of the Quran — translated by M.A.S. Abdel Haleem — says "strike them in the neck" in place of "strike off their heads", and that this is the case for all instances in which the phrase "strike off their heads" might be used in other translations). Immolation, however, is merely a cruel and gruesome way to provide brutal spectacle for international observers and others who are watching ISIS and its actions.

In recent weeks, pushback against the Islamic State has come in the form of renewed combat with the Iraqi Army, who, bolstered by the aid of Iranian militias, have begun contesting ISIS's control over areas such as Tikrit. It is not yet known at the time of this writing what the outcome of these clashes will be, but it should be noted that the ouster of ISIS forces from the town of Kobane by the Kurdish peshmerga has the potential to be a sign of things to come.

With this background in mind, let us know dive into the various aspects of ISIS that come together to demonstrate how ISIS is a reactionary modernist organization.

ISIS as more than a fundamentalist movement

ISIS is not just an Islamist movement (movements that believe that Islam should govern social, political, and personal life), nor simply a fundamentalist one (demanding strict adherence to theological doctrine), but a movement that goes far beyond the scope of either of these categories. This can be demonstrated on almost every level. While previous movements like al-Qaeda can superficially be said to have similar goals and ideals, there is such a divergence in tactics, goals, and ideology in the case of ISIS that we are forced to consider them a different phenomena altogether.

It is true that ISIS began as an offshoot of al-Qaeda, but that genealogy does not nullify the subsequent changes over the years that led ISIS to evolve into a very different beast than al-Qaeda. Al-Qaeda believed that if a caliphate were to arise in the future, it would not happen in the lifetime of any of its members, including its infamous leader Osama bin Laden.[14] As it were, this was ultimately to be the case for bin Laden, whose life was ended before such an occurrence could come to pass. The al-Qaeda leadership that followed him, however, soon had their beliefs quickly repudiated when Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi declared the founding of a new caliphate under his rule. One wonders if this move was also partly influenced by a desire to prove al-Qaeda

wrong, which would have the impact of making ISIS look like a more legitimate movement in comparison.

Additionally, the tactics used by both organizations differ wildly. Al-Qaeda adopted as its *modus operandi* a style of terrorism focused on causing dramatic attacks, often those of a suicidal nature (i.e. the bombing of the USS Cole and the 9/11 World Trade Center Attacks). The idea was to seem as if they could strike from anywhere. This was intended to force the US to draw down its presence in the Middle East and its commitments to certain Middle Eastern countries, especially Israel.

ISIS, on the other hand, though it employed al-Qaeda tactics in its early days, was shaped more by the Syrian Civil War, and so it has a strong focus on capturing and holding territory. While al-Qaeda wanted to attack the United States and other western countries, ISIS wants to build its own state, and many of its tactics reflect that end.

it would be appropriate to notice that this difference is reflective of a difference between the two organizations in their preferred enemy to combat: the faraway United States (in the case of Al-Qaeda) or the nearby Middle Eastern countries (in the case of ISIS).

Now seems like a good point to make a quick comment on a popular myth that has been floating about. It has been said that the schism between ISIS and al-Qaeda began over a disagreement over the brutal tactics that ISIS employed. While this wasn't quite the case (the tactics used by the two organizations up until that time had been essentially the same), the application of said brutal tactics on the envoy that al-Qaeda sent to mediate the dispute between ISIS and al-Nusra probably didn't help matters.[15]

Finally, on matters of both theology and ideology, ISIS and al-Qaeda have some significant differences. While al-Qaeda was content to be a radical Salafi[*] jihadi movement that violently opposed the US presence in the Middle East (especially US support for Israel) as well

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[*] The Salafi movement is an approach to Islam that adopts a very strict interpretation of Islam and promotes a style of living that emulates that of the original followers of Muhammad.

as the encroachment of western political and cultural ideals in the Middle East, ISIS has gone further and explored even more radical ideas, like eschatological apocalypticism. ISIS believes that it is bringing about the events that will lead to the end of the world, and it is quite enthusiastic about its role in the process.[16]

A recent publication in *The Atlantic* covered this aspect of ISIS more fully, noting that ISIS "follows a distinctive variety of Islam whose beliefs about the path to the Day of Judgment matter to its strategy". ISIS "awaits the army of 'Rome,' whose defeat at Dabiq, Syria, will initiate the countdown to the apocalypse" (Rome is understood to mean either Turkey or the United States, though it is possible that any large, Western army will do).[17] *The Atlantic* claims the quest to trigger the apocalypse is one of the driving urges behind the actions of ISIS. This sort of things was never expounded by Al-Qaeda, which, as far as can be observed, has no interest in bringing about the end of the world and the destruction of all that we know.

Granted, there are many who challenge this view of ISIS. *The New Republic* argues that ISIS is not, in fact, driven by religious fervor, quoting Didier Francois, a former hostage of the group, who claims that none of the members he interacted with discusses religion or even had a copy of the Qur'an with them.[18]

We should perhaps note that Francois was released from ISIS captivity in April 2014, months before they roared in Iraq and announced a caliphate. It is entirely possible that ISIS changed its tone in the interstice, adopting a greater religious focus after its rebranding demanding a different public front. However, this does seems unlikely and it would be against all precepts of intellectual rigor to base any arguments of unfounded assumptions like this. Without further information, we cannot make a proper assessment on this matter. In any event, however, they seem not to share the goals of Al-Qaeda. We shall return to the confusion on this matter later in this thesis.

Al-Qaeda was (and still is) interested in removing the forces of western countries like the United States from the Middle East—hardly a surprising goal given their pedigree as an organization founded to remove the forces of the USSR from Afghanistan during the Soviet invasion of that country. ISIS, on the other hand, is eagerly awaiting the massing of the Armies of Rome near the city of Dabiq, Syria, so that they might begin the battle that will lead to the end of the world.

In summary, the genealogy of ISIS as a Salafi jihadist movement is evident, but over time (especially the past few years), they have become far more than that. They have become their own phenomenon, distinguishing themselves in many ways from al-Qaeda. To top it off, the two groups even had their own schism. Thus, while ISIS is like previous fundamentalist movements, it is not just like previous fundamentalists movements, and we should not make the mistake of treating them as only a fundamentalist movement.

The Iranian Revolution also offers a possible parallel — being, according to Herf, a reactionary modernist movement as well — but even in this case, the differences arise quickly. There is the obvious sectarian split, of course (the Iranian regime is a Shia theocracy, while ISIS is a radical Sunni movement), and though it could be argued that both are actually similar in how they each used the idea of religious dispossession to rally popular support, there are still differences in tactics, goals and ideology.

There is, admittedly, a similarity in the way that both phenomena made a grab for political power, but we must bear in mind that the Iranian Revolution was intended to seize the levers of government, not to build a new state from scratch in the way that ISIS is attempting.

Additionally, the Iranian Revolution did bring in a government with significant Islamist elements, but it set up among other things, a council of ruling clerics guided by a particular Ayatollah. It does not claim to speak for all Muslims, but it merely claims to be the legitimate government of Iran (and it indeed is treated as such by the people of Iran and the global

community at large). ISIS has set up a Caliphate ruled by a Caliph who claims to speak for all Muslims, and who has declared an intent to rule over the entire world (an ambition that we have never seen exhibited by the Iranian leadership).

The Iranian ayatollahs also have significant ideological differences from ISIS, especially on the subject of the end of the world. As far as can be ascertained, they are not actively engaged in trying to bring about the end of days.

It seems almost self-evident that ISIS is behaving in a manner and is subscribing to beliefs that have not been seen before in any prior Islamist movement of any stripe. However, to merely write them off as just being different than what has come before perhaps underscores the unique ways in which they differentiate themselves from other ostensibly similar groups. They have innovated and evolved in ways that are different from previous iterations of Islamist, fundamentalist, or jihadi groups.

One of the more fundamental ways in which ISIS has distinguished itself from previous jihadi movements has been in the development of a ravenous and well-oiled revenue-producing machine. Previous Islamist movement have often lived and died by private donations and other illicit support from wealthy individuals (and possibly state funds) from gulf nations. ISIS raises revenue in a fashion more akin to an organized crime syndicate, and like any savvy mafia, they have a vast array of income streams. Oil revenues from captured oil fields have been the most newsworthy of these, with evidence accumulating that captured oil is being smuggled across national borders and sold to countries like Turkey.[19] Control of that great black gold has proved immensely profitable for the organization, who seem to have found buyers (at least at one point) in the form of other rebel groups and possibly the Turkish government. The implications of this are certainly worth exploring, but they are sadly irrelevant to our current investigation. For now, we shall simply state that ISIS is selling natural resources on, if not the black market, the grey market, a point which makes the mafia analogy particularly salient.

ISIS also has significant cash resources on hand from its takeover of government buildings across northern Iraq (it is thought to have looted over $400 million from its June 2014 capture of the city of Mosul).[20] This and other acts of looting is behavior that is more in line with English privateers attacking Spanish galleons or the proverbial barbarians at the gates of Rome, not al-Qaeda or previous Islamist movements, which were more concerned with staging dramatic acts of terror than forcibly seizing capital.

ISIS also has control over commodities grown in areas it controls, such as wheat, which it sells in sacks bearing the ISIS logo (consumers are generally the people in the area under its control.[21] This control over basic foodstuffs and other commodities allows the group to exert a form of control over captured areas that is much stronger than what we usually see in areas in which Islamic jihadists are able to exert influence.

ISIS also has control over dams and power plants in the area under its control, granting it the ability to control how much water and electricity is available to the people under its control. It leverages this control to draw revenue, but it also provides a means of exerting its will over conquered areas.[22]

ISIS also brings in protection money from local business and other establishments. It can even be argued that this is merely a form of taxation, although this depends on the degree to which one can consider ISIS a governing body. They certainly act like one, and they possess all the trappings of a government, including the enforcing of law, the provisioning of social services, and uncontested military control over their particular territory.[23] They are, of course, not recognized by the UN or the international community as a legitimate state, but if we do not consider this to be the defining feature of a modern state, it is hard to argue that the Islamic State is not, in fact, a state. This alone necessitates that we categorize it differently than al-Qaeda and other previous jihadi organizations.

Kidnapping foreigners and holding them for ransom has also been attempted by the organization. This has been something of a win-win tactic for ISIS, which has allowed it not only to raise revenue, but also to engage in a number of high-profile executions that provided for the group extreme media attention (such as the cases of the American James Foley, the two Japanese hostages Haruna Yukawa and Kenji Goto, and the Jordanian fighter pilot Moath al-Kasasbeh). This was one of the key ways that ISIS was able to raise its profile and become a household name.

All told, ISIS is a self-financed organization that takes in roughly one to four million dollars a day without relying on private donors (who are icing on the cake for the ISIS balance sheets). This puts it in a completely different camp than previous Islamist or fundamentalist organizations.

Furthermore, ISIS has made a deliberate effort to appeal to a broader base of people than previous jihadi movements, which never put much effort into recruiting members from beyond the boundaries of a few large, Sunni Muslim countries. ISIS has invested a stunning proportion of its resources into developing and executing a social media strategy that not only works to raise morale and parade the idea that ISIS is invincible, but also has served as a highly effective means of recruiting new members. Most remarkable is the degree to which is has recruited not only young men from European countries like France and the Netherlands, but also young women, who reportedly comprise 10% of European recruits to ISIS.[24]

This is actually one of the more interesting aspects of the ISIS recruitment strategy. The pool of young men and women in the Middle East and North Africa willing to join ISIS is sufficiently deep to fill the ISIS ranks, but ISIS does not appear satisfied to rely on this source of manpower. It deliberately tries to appeal to disaffected Muslim youth in Europe, and it gladly parades ISIS fighters from European countries like "Jihadi John"* in front of its cameras.

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* "Jihadi John" (birth name: Muhammad Jassim Abdulkarim Olayan al-Dhafiri, but better known as Mohammed Emwazi) is a former inhabitant of Britain who is believed to be the executioner in many of the

The implications of this reveal a rather clever bit of strategy. Western countries have in modern times prided themselves on their inclusiveness, trumpeting their love of ideals like "diversity" and "multiculturalism". In winning over European Muslims, ISIS accomplishes a few objectives. First, it claims that is better able to provide a tolerant space for Muslims of all backgrounds and heritages. This gives it ground to argue that it is better at cultivating a truly multicultural society than European countries. In this way, it can claim to take said European countries and hoist them on the petard of some of their own highest ideals. The implications and ideas behind this strategy will discussed in more detail later on.

Additionally, by recruiting from Europe, ISIS is able to claim a type of superiority over the European model. The greater the tide of people leaving European countries for the Islamic State, the more that ISIS can claim that it's model is better able to provide people with what they want in life, which suggests a stronger claim to legitimacy. Thus, by poaching European citizens, ISIS is able to derive strong arguments for its legitimacy as a governing body.

Furthermore, in deliberately appealing to the European Muslim population, ISIS is not only able to increase its manpower, but it also fosters support among the European Muslim community. This support increases the chances of "lone wolf" type attacks on the European continent. Such attacks not only fuel ISIS's reputation, but also force European countries to take action in response to potential threats. It is not hard to imagine that some of these potential actions, such as greater scrutiny of the European Muslim community, will cause sufficient discontent for some in this community to turn towards ISIS and its ideology. Furthermore, ISIS's actions, especially if they inspire "lone-wolf" attacks in various European countries, are also likely to lead to stirrings of anti-Muslim sentiment which could further disenfranchise European Muslim populations. It is not beyond the realm of possibility that either (or both) of these

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ISIS hostage execution videos. A former IT salesman, it is not known for certain at this time why he left his life in Britain behind and joined ISIS.

responses this could trigger a vicious cycle. Whether ISIS is intentionally trying to cause this is unclear, but there is a good chance that it could occur.

Taking all these various factors in mind, we can see that, though there are some parallels with other fundamentalist groups, there are significant points of divergence with all of them that we are better served by viewing ISIS as something different than everything that has come before it. There are some similarities with al-Qaeda, which is understandable, given the lineage of ISIS, but there are enough differences to make such a comparison one of apples and oranges. There are some similarities with the Iranian Revolution, but again, a similar problem is evident. We could bring up other fundamentalist movements with ostensible similarities, such as the Taliban, but sufficient differences always arise (usually in the realms of goals and/or theology) to make such a comparison less than adequate in terms of analytic or predictive power.

In conclusion, there is much that we miss in any analysis of ISIS if we treat them solely as yet another fundamentalist movement. It is for this reason that I think it so important that we recognize that ISIS is not just a fundamentalist movement, but also a reactionary modernist one. In understanding that it is both things, we are able to grasp a better understanding of what it is, where it comes from, why we are seeing it now, and what it will do in the future. With this in mind, we will now analyze the traits of ISIS that will give us the answers to all of these questions.

ISIS as a Reactionary Movement

There are several definitions as to what comprises a "reactionary" political movement, but the simplest one is any movement that advocates the return of some previous social or political condition. Given that one of the most overt actions undertaken by the Islamic State was the declaration of a new caliphate, a form of government arising from the early days of the

muslim *umma* (community) that was abolished in 1924*, it would be logically incoherent to suggest that ISIS is anything other than politically reactionary, especially in light of the opposition they have posed towards the progressive development of Middle Eastern societies towards "modern" ideas like that of democracy, women's rights, and freedom of religion.

However, the definition of reactionary we have been using so far is that of being against the ideals of the European Enlightenment as normally understood. In this regard too, we can apply the term to ISIS, which subscribes to beliefs that run contrary to those espoused by the Enlightenment. Given this, it would seem we can dispense with any trepidation as to the usage of this label.

Yet, what about ISIS make it so reactionary? What is it reacting against? One of the biggest ideas that ISIS stands in opposition to is the idea of tolerance; religious tolerance in particular, but also a smattering of ethnic tolerance as well.

ISIS is a radical Sunni movement, and it holds no love for those whom they consider to be infidels. This ire extends not only to Christians, Jews, and other religious minorities, but also to Shia Muslims ,who are considered heretics. When ISIS conquers new territory, one of the first things it does is to go through the population with a fine-tooth comb, rooting out Shia and executing them (it seems this is done through a combination of indirect methods, such as asking people how they pray and inquiring as to where they were born, which are indicators of a person's religious affiliation).

As already stated, however, their intolerance does not extend only to the Shia. ISIS are also openly hostile towards other unique cultural groups in the region, such as the Yazidis, an

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* The Caliph was a position that signified the leader of the Islamic community following the death of Mohammed. It was thus a position of incredible significance, so much so that it was a heated dispute over the proper person to be appointed to the Caliphate that precipitated the Sunni/Shia split. The Caliphate as an institution lasted from the death of Mohammed until 1924, when it was officially ended by the first President of the Turkish republic, Mustafa Kemal, following the death of the Ottoman Empire. Various calls to reestablish the caliphate have arisen on occasion since 1924, but little was done in response to these proposals, which failed to gather popular support. ISIS represents the most successful initiative for the establishment of a new caliphate in the 91 years since the last one ended.

ancient and somewhat insular ethno-religious group generally dispersed through northern Iraq. ISIS, believing that the Yazidis represented a particularly nefarious strain of non-Islamic influence, attempted to wipe them out in the late summer of 2014. This action, like so many that ISIS has undertaken since its rise to prominence, launched a severe media frenzy. Ultimately, this attempt was thwarted by a combination of US airstrikes and participation by Kurdish forces, but it still shows the resolve that ISIS has on the matter of eliminating those they consider to be infidels.

The Kurds, they too have come under attack by ISIS, and have been in a near-constant state of war with the group since its eruption across the plains of northern Iraq in early 2014. It would not be an exaggeration to say that the Kurds were the initial vanguard in the fight against ISIS (though at the time of this writing the Iraqi military has started to take action with the aid of Iranian "advisors"), which has not only stated publicly, but has also given every indication otherwise that it intends to wipe them out the way it tried to do so with the Yazidis. The constant low-level war between the two groups is sufficient evidence for this.

ISIS has also shown a less-than-benevolent attitude towards those of Christian faith, frequently ordering them to submit to Sharia law by paying the *jizya*[25] a tax on all those under Muslim rule who are not Muslim, but sometimes also dropping the idea of payment and just killing them in nasty ways, sometimes even crucifying those who will not renounce their faith.[26]

Finally, it should also be noted that this intolerance extends not only to those of different religious faiths or those whom they deem to be a threat to the society that ISIS seeks to create, but also to others whom are deemed to be in violation of the law that they seek to impose. One group of people who are said to be in violation of these laws are homosexuals, who are at risk of being thrown off of rooftops. Needless to say, this is a course of action that is far from we might consider "tolerant".[27]

In should be noted that though the organization does state that it is open to Muslims from around the world, there have been reports that in practice, the group has occasionally engaged in racial discrimination, believing, for example, that Muslims who come from South Asian countries and weak and not up to the task of battle.[28] This isn't quite reactionary *per se*, but because it demonstrates a disregard for progressive ideals, it could be a sign of reactionary sentiment on the matter of ethnic relations. Interestingly enough, this sort of behavior runs in opposition to certain of the realities of the historical caliphate, which had a rather cosmopolitan flair, and was generally quite "tolerant" (in the sense of allowing religious and ethnic diversity to flourish).[*]

Furthermore, the group's treatment of women is highly reactionary in nature. Women who are captured in battle by ISIS fighters are frequently made into sex slaves, an act which the group claims is defensible under Quranic law. Women who come to join the Islamic State come knowing that they will be made "war brides" for ISIS fighters. This is not an organization that is campaigning for progressive ideals, but rather, is deliberately acting against the ones that it believes have been corrupting "proper" Islamic culture, and it is doing this by erasing them from the land that it conquers.

However, it is not solely its treatment of women and people of different religious and ethnic affiliations that makes ISIS reactionary. It is also seeking to return all Muslims on earth to a state in which they will be ruled by the laws of the early Muslim community under Muhammad. Muhammad died in 632. Any attempt to emulate the system he set up is by definition one that attempts to go back to the seventh century (or perhaps more accurately, how ISIS views that time period).

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[*] ISIS's conception of the Caliphate appears in practice to be as a stripped-down version that seems designed more to emulate the spirit of the original community (albeit their particular interpretation of the original community) rather than the actual historical traditions of the Caliphate.

We must never forget that ISIS actively seeks to establish a caliphate, which is hardly a form of governance that falls in line with the ideals of Enlightenment-era thought. Rather, the caliphate arose as a form of governance suited to the martial culture of the early Islamic Empire, which rapidly expanded across the Arabian Peninsula and beyond by way of the sword. The early caliphs were warlords, and though later caliphs were hardly so fearsome as the position of "Warlord" implies, the prestige of the position still arose because of an early history of martial glory. Setting aside fancy theological justifications, there is a certain martial justification that props up the office of the Caliph, one that runs contrary to modernist ideals of government and one that al-Baghdadi is most certainly emulating.

ISIS as a Modernist Movement

In light of ISIS's reactionary tendencies, it seems odd to claim that it is a highly modernist organization. Yet, despite the vehemently reactionary rhetoric, it is impossible not to think of ISIS as a highly modernist organization, complete with an efficient modern organizational structure.

The first point to be noted in this vein is the way that ISIS uses modern technology. They are by no means Luddites, and they rely not only on captured US arms and armaments, but also a savvy and effective media strategy. Now, it should be noted that simply using modern technology does not make one modernist, but the means of organization that emerge from their clever usage of social media reflects a decidedly modernist approach to mobilizing followers and sympathizers, one fixated on drawing people's support and deriving legitimacy from popular will.

It is the media strategy that has garnered the most attention, partly because it is like nothing ever witnessed before from an extremist group. Observing their actions, it is hard not to

conclude that ISIS carefully and deliberately chooses to take actions that will elicit the biggest media response, which in turn propels rumors and fears about their capabilities.

This has been one of the main reasons behind their targeting of journalists and other media personnel (there are few things that are more effective at drawing media attention than killing the people who work in it), and it has also been one of the reasons they release gruesome videos of hostage executions. They understand that such actions send the media into hysterics (something that is very easy to do in this day and age, when the mainstream media needs to constantly be whipping people into a frenzy in order to generate the viewership it needs in order to remain relevant at a time when fewer and fewer people are getting their news through "mainstream" media outlets), painting ISIS in exactly the light it wants to be painted in and ceding to it control of the media narrative.

ISIS's seemingly intentional efforts to trigger media hysterics indicate a highly modernist understanding of the war that war is waged. ISIS places a high priority on being able to shape the media narrative, a highly modernist way of waging war (arguably *the* modernist way of waging war, in that the true battleground being fought over is the public perception of legitimacy). In an era with a 24/7 media cycle and social media networks that allow people to broadcast breaking events as they happen, the battlefield of public perception is the single-most important field of war[*], a fact that ISIS has recognized and acted upon to great effect. The prizes they have won in doing so are not only a fearsome reputation, but also a steady stream of recruits.

However, their focus on garnering western media attention is not their only tactical aim. Their head-chopping, black-flag-flying antics are also meant to signal to the rest of the Islamic world that they are the strong horse of radical Islamist movements; the only one strong enough, capable enough, and ruthless enough to advance the cause of radical Islam and enforce Islamic

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[*] To see what happens when a superior military force begins to lose the media war, take note of recent Israeli conflicts in Gaza, which have been overwhelming Israeli victories in a tactical sense, yet horrific Israeli losses in the realm of public opinion.

rule over the land. Though they clearly seek to draw the eyes of the West, they are also acutely

aware that there are many in the Islamic world who would be willing to cast their support behind

ISIS, if ISIS can prove to them that it is capable of accomplishing its goals. Much of its media

antics are also driven by a desire to "prove themselves" to the Muslim world, as it were,

especially those who could be swayed to finance or fight for ISIS.

As part of their strategy to dictate the media narrative about their actions, ISIS has a

complex and coordinated social media strategy designed to serve two main goals: 1) convince

the world that ISIS is a menacing and highly-capable military force, and 2) spread pro-ISIS

propaganda in order to draw new recruits into the fold.[29]

One means by which ISIS is able to apply social media is by "gaming" the system. ISIS

has a downloadable app by the name of Dawn, which users can download through the web or on

a mobile device.[30] Once activated, the app will post tweets to Twitter from your account. All

other users of the app will post the same tweet, but these tweets are not all posted at once.

Rather, they are spread out at regular intervals. This serves to bypass Twitter's spam-detecting

algorithms while making it look as though far more people are talking about ISIS than they really

are. By artificially increasing their social media footprint in this way, ISIS is able to make itself

appear more numerous than it actually is. This makes it appear more fearsome and more

threatening..

On top of all this, ISIS creates recruitment videos that are designed to appeal to certain

audiences. ISIS understands that the more European and American citizens it can recruit, the

more legitimacy it can claim, by virtue of having foreign citizens act as if ISIS is a more

legitimate ruling entity than the governments of the countries where they come from.

This idea of legitimacy as derived from the people, seems an odd justification for ISIS to

rely on (being so thoroughly drenched in anti-Enlightenment thought), but I posit that this makes

sense for multiple reasons. One of these is that, in claiming to speak for all "true" Muslims, ISIS

necessarily requires the acquiescence of Muslims to its rules and to its proclamations. ISIS, though it claims to derive authority from the divine, has very much gambled its authority on the degree to which Muslims are willing to accept its authority. This is what necessitates the aggressive social media campaigns that project such a fearsome image, and it also requires that ISIS achieve continual success on the battlefield. If either of those two are undermined, ISIS loses a significant amount of legitimacy. This is a highly modernist conception of legitimacy that requires modernist methods in order to uphold. in this way, ISIS is forced to be modernist.

Furthermore, playing games with political justification in this fashion serves as a means of hoisting western countries on their own petard (as has been discussed previously in this thesis). If the people choose ISIS and not Europe, that undercuts Europe while strengthening ISIS. This is why ISIS is so enthusiastic in showing off its fighters who come from Europe to join the caliphate.

There is also a significant undercurrent of universalism that underpins much of ISIS's ideology. ISIS claims to speak for all Muslims, not just the ones under its immediate jurisdiction. It claims to have legitimate authority over all Muslims on the globe. It allows for any Muslim to come and join its ranks. Furthermore, it also denies the borders of established nations, and believes all mankind to be subject to the same law.

Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi himself has said that "Syria does not belong to the Syrians, and Iraq does not belong to the Iraqis".[31] This is a proclamation we would expect to hear perhaps out of the mouth of an anarchist, socialist, radical libertarian, or ardent post-modernist, not the leader of a feared jihadi organization..

There is one other possibility that could explain this, however. Let us take a moment to consider the idea of al-Baghdadi as some kind of imperialist figure. This isn't necessarily a terrible assessment. Much of his rhetoric has focused on the idea of Islam conquering the world, which, if nothing else, indicates a certain religious imperialism. Additionally, he takes pains to

make sure that ISIS emulates the early Muslim community in several ways, right down to not only the laws but also the aggressive expansion.

In this way, we can actually think of al-Baghdadi as an imperialist figure. What is key, however, is that his imperialism is driven by ideological impetus. This imprimatur is akin to that that drove many European countries (i.e., "The White Man's Burden"). This impulse could not have arisen without the development of modernist thought, particularly ideas of nationalism. Without any ideas of nationalism, European imperialism could not have existed, as it was rooted in the concept of said nation (Britain, France...etc) being more civilized than other nations, which were thus in need of civilized European rule in order to become civilized themselves.

Perhaps al-Baghdadi isn't quite thinking along those lines, but he has stated that Syria does not belong to the Syrians and Iraq does not belong to the Iraqis. What he seems to be saying is that these lands belong to all Muslims who are willing to come join the caliphate, and that all Muslims should live together in a universalist community in which each and every Muslim is treated like a brother by each of his fellow Muslims.

But enough of putting words in his mouth. Let's here what else he has to say on the matter:

"The legality of all emirates, groups, states and organisations becomes null by the expansion of the caliph's authority and the arrival of its troops to their areas…Listen to your caliph and obey him. Support your state, which grows every day."[32]

That sounds like imperialist rhetoric. In a way, this makes perfect sense. If you're going to create a universalist society, you're going to need land, and you're going to have to get that land somehow. If no one is willing to sell it to you, or otherwise give it to you, you're going to have to do something to get it. Conquest is is practically the only option left.

Now, a true universalist might not necessarily try to subject everyone on earth to his ideals, but he or she necessarily has to believe that everyone on earth is subject to them (whether

those ideals deal with "freedom" or "equality" or "submission to God"...etc). It is easy to see how the temptation to subject others to your ideals might arise if you truly believe that your ideals govern them.

Thus, while al-Baghdadi might actually be more of an imperialist figure than a universalist one, he is not lacking in either. In fact, we might even hypothesize that his universalism drives his imperialism, as he must necessarily claim territory from those who do not share his extreme universalism in order to found his universalist society. On both of these counts, he is echoing Enlightenment ideals, and ISIS is his tool to implement them. In this fashion, ISIS cannot avoid being modernist, and we are thus justified in treating it as such (and, quite frankly, it would be inappropriate for us to do otherwise).

It should be noted that though this type of universalism reflects a distinctly modernist way of thinking, it also has precedent in the Islamic tradition, which encourages a brotherhood among members of the *umma* (muslim community). The fiery vigor with which ISIS pursues this end seems to be indicative of a zeal far beyond merely that we could expect from the modernist reading or the reactionary one. Being driven by an ideology at the expense of all else is a highly modernist behavior, but it seems that even ideology is not enough to explain the actions of ISIS. It seems fueled by something more.

It seems that the reactionary and the modernist have come together on this matter, and infused ISIS to pursue it with a zeal that we would not see if this universalism were only a reactionary idea or only a modernist idea.

The universalism of ISIS reflects not only its reactionary side, but also it modernist one. This universalism bridges both aspects, which is perhaps one of the reasons why it is so key to everything that ISIS does. Might this dynamic be representative of reactionary modernism in general? This is something we cannot rule out, and it is an idea that we will return to later on.

Finally, we must touch on an issue that was brought up earlier: whether ISIS truly believes in the apocalypse-centered brand of Islam that it claims drives its actions. This is somewhat of a crucial point, and this is the section in which we can address it more completely.

Let us suppose that ISIS does in fact subscribe to the beliefs that it claims to believe. In this case, their attempt to go back to a "purer" time and revive their idea of what was once lost is a highly modernist conceit. If this is true, they are modernist.

Suppose, however, that this is not true, and they are merely using such fiery rhetoric as a means of drawing recruits and manipulating perceptions of them. Such Machiavellian tactics implicate a certain modernist competent as well. They indicate a modernist understanding of control and influence (see the earlier discussion of the Nazis and propaganda for a better idea of how this works).

Whether or not ISIS actually believes what it is saying, it is modernist, so the issue is not of great importance for our purposes. For what it is worth, however, I find it difficult to believe that ISIS has constructed an entire set of beliefs that it only claims to believe in order to attract recruits. It seems more believable to say that ISIS, at least to a large degree, believes the things that it says it believes. However, further research is needed for a conclusive answer.

ISIS as a Post-Colonial Movement

Finally, it is necessary to take a moment to point out that in many ways, ISIS is very much a product of the post-colonial environment. This will be a key point shortly, but it also serves as a way of further demonstrating that ISIS arose fundamentally as a reaction to its circumstances, and a modern reaction at that.

Before we begin, it is worth bearing in mind a fact that has been mentioned several times already in this thesis, that ISIS was born from Al-Qaeda in Iraq, the Iraqi offshoot of the jihadi

group Al-Qaeda, which was established in the late 1980s (with significant US support) to combat Soviet forces in Afghanistan and then morphed into a Salafi jihadist group determined to oust the United States from the Middle East after the Soviets retreated. In other words, the withdrawal of an occupying force led to the environment that altered the goals and workings of the al-Qaeda organization. There are clearly some post-colonial principles at work here.

This does not show that ISIS is post-colonial, however, just that it has a post-colonial heritage that will define it as long as it exists. What makes ISIS post-colonial is the unique set of experiences that shaped it as it arose to combat US troops in Iraq as AQI.

As AQI, ISIS worked to combat US influence in the region, even experimenting with seizing and governing territory. All of these initiatives were a reaction to the US presence in the region and an attempt to reassert control in the chaotic aftermath of the fall of Saddam.

The subsequent crushing of AQI, its rebranding as ISI, and its retreat into Syria prompted a change in approach, but at no point did this group ever stop being a reaction against the US, even after the US withdrawal from the region.

US withdrawal from Iraq, however, was what set the stage for ISIS to erupt onto the global scene. After forging itself in the crucible of the Syrian Civil War (an engagement that the US refrained from involving itself for several reasons, including the weariness of the general public for entanglements in the Middle East and the unclear nature of what action take and with whom in particular it should be taken), ISIS stormed into Iraq, which had been in the early stages of adjusting to post-occupation society. This adjustment resulted in several factors that enabled ISIS's success.

First, one of the things that the US did after removing Saddam was to remove the Sunni minority from power, especially the ruling Ba'athist party. This was done in order to develop a democratic government that would be more inclusive of the various groups composing Iraqi

society. However, there were a couple of consequences resulting from this that sowed seeds that would be harvested down the line by ISIS.

By drastically curtailing Sunni power in Iraq, many Sunni felt that they had been sufficiently disenfranchised as to fear for their safety (a not unfair sentiment considering that one of the consequences of the sectarian civil violence in the years following the US invasion was to turn almost every neighborhood in Iraq into a religious enclave). Many Sunni tribes were thus willing to give license to ISIS to act as it would to combat the Shia, who, as the numerical majority in Iraq, were, to a certain degree, feared by the Sunni.

On top of this, the dispossession of the Ba'athists left many army officers and others with military training without the capacity to integrate themselves into the new Iraq. This pool of un-utilized human capital was one of the great treasures captured by ISIS in their invasion Iraq, as many former Ba'athists joined the organization, swelling its ranks with experienced soldiers.[33]

In summary, we would be remiss to overlook that much of context that drove ISIS to become such a reactionary organization was the environment created by the draw-down of foreign powers from the region. It would be a mistake to ignore that ISIS styles itself as a reaction against democracy, secularism, and western culture. Finally, we must not forget that this could not have happened if there was not a sentiment in the region that western influence in the Middle East was pernicious and destructive.

Part of the fundamental essence of ISIS is that it is a reaction against the perceived imposition of a foreign power imposing its culture and ideology upon the region. ISIS rejects the ideals that the US tried to instill in the region during its occupation of Iraq, and it has dedicated itself to eradicating each and every one of those ideals from the country.

This is also true not just of the ideals that the US sought to implement, but also the governing structure that it set up, in which the Shia, as the numerical majority, were given far more power than they were under the rule of Saddam, under whom they were shut out of much

of the most important governing apparatus. ISIS was able to curry favor and support among Sunni groups who were afraid that they would come under threat under the new government (understandable, given the sectarian violence of the 2006 civil war).

Insofar as we bear this in mind, we are forced to accept that ISIS is, among other things, an expression post-colonial sentiments, and part of the momentum behind its success can be attributed to this.

Putting it all together

As has been shown, ISIS is a combination of several different traits. It is in part a reactionary organization, driven by an urge to repeal the changes that have been made to society over the centuries. It is in part a modernist organization, relying on modernist assumptions and perpetuating modernist ideas. It is in part a post-colonial organization, arising from the context of a region that had been radically altered by the influence of a foreign power that had invaded and imposed its will.

ISIS is not remarkable because it is these things, however. What makes it so unique is the way that each of these traits come together to drive the organization. In particular, the combination of its reactionary side and its modernist side make it a reactionary modernist organization. It is this synthesis that makes it so misunderstood, and without conceptualizing ISIS as a reactionary modernist organization, we will never be able to grasp the whole truth regarding this group.

However, it is the post-colonial flavor that hold the weightiest implications; not for ISIS itself, but for the future of reactionary modernist organizations. It is this future upon which we shall now turn our eye.

Section III: The Road Ahead

This concludes our discussion of ISIS. While it is tempting to attempt to make some predictions as to what they will do next and what will happen with them in the future, this will not be covered here. What I hope to do at this point is to posit a simple hypothesis: that reactionary modernism is going to manifest itself in new ways in the coming century, and that we will see more reactionary modernist movements form and gain traction in the future.

It is here that the true importance of ISIS's post-colonial nature becomes clear. We live in a world in which the relative power of the United States and its influence across the world is beginning to decline. China is rising, while the US has overstretched itself and is pulling back from its Middle Eastern adventures to lick its wounds. The structural order of the modern world, which has the US as its cornerstone, is beginning to look a little shaky, and competitors are already rising to take advantage of any potential reorganizations. Even the EU is looking anemic, and there is talk of certain nations pulling out. We are soon to be living in a world that is going to be operating on post-colonial principles.

Every action has an equal and opposite reaction. This is a fact not just in physics, but also in the realm of human interactions. Liberal actions lead to illiberal reactions. Imperial actions lead to anti-imperial reactions. Colonial actions lead to post-colonial reactions. The interaction between all these actions and reactions is what shapes our world and governs the making of history.

Any change in the status quo creates new opportunities. This is true from the smallest examples to the big, from a change in the rulebook for intramural softball to a reorganization of the power dynamics that compose the global structure. A changing future thus opens up opportunities for those who are well-positioned to take advantage of them.

The current world order is dominated by the United States. However, this dominance is not as strong as it once was. The liberal world order underpinned by US hegemony is not nearly as solid as it once was, and this is opening up opportunities for inevitable reaction.

On top of this, we must bear in mind that the actions of the US and its allies can be construed as imperialist in nature, even if this arguably was not their intent. To thus posit that a pullback in US presence from the world (as well as a pullback from several of the major world institutions backed by US power) leaves fertile ground for post-colonial movements to arise is thus a matter of common sense.[*]

To put this plainly, a decrease in the power of the liberal imperialist global world order buttressed by the United States is exceedingly likely to open up a void that can only be filled by illiberal post-colonial movements. We don't need to speculate that this might happen, however. We have already seen it happen in the plains of northern Iraq. We will see it happen again.

This is good news for the proliferation of future reactionary modernist organizations. As the old order transitions to the new, reactions against the old will arise. A good number of these reactions will have the necessary mix of reactionary impulses and modernist ideas to be classified as reactionary modernist organizations.

One way this urge will be expressed is through nationalist and independence movements. These will not necessarily be reactionary modernist in character, but some will more likely than not be definitely reactionary modernist.

The recent Scottish referendum vote is an interesting example of this. Though not reactionary in the sense that it wished to run up against the ideals of the Enlightenment, it did attempt to return society to an earlier condition (specifically, 1706, the year before the Acts of the Union united Scotland and England together to form the United Kingdom). Thus, while we

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[*] We must take into account that this account refers only to the ability of the US government to influence world events (a capacity that will remain incredibly significant but not unilaterally uncontested in coming years). I do not refer to the prevalence of US corporations and business and their role in the global economy, which will not have nearly the same impact on geo-political happenings.

cannot call it reactionary modernist, it was in a sense reactionary in that it attempted to revert to a prior state of affairs, and this is not something that we should overlook.

This referendum was, of course, modernist in the sense that it was a nationalist movement, which by nature can only exist in the context of modernity. Still, it is interesting to note that it does contain a small element of the necessary ingredients to define something as reactionary modernist. There is a small similarity to ISIS in that both movements were in part fuelled by a romantic desire to return to a prior condition of being, and of going back to a more "authentic" past.

Based on the general rise of right-wing political parties in Europe over the past few years, we can guess that we will see some proliferation of reactionary modernist movements there. While groups like UKIP and le Front Nationale have captured headlines, the organization that most exemplifies the principles of reactionary modernism in among major European political parties right now is the Greek political party Golden Dawn.

Golden Dawn is one of the most right-wing parties in Greek politics today. It has been described as a fascist, neo-Nazi organization, though the group has denied that it is either of those things. It has, however, willingly labeled itself as nationalist and racist.[34] The organization has praised both Greek Dictator Ioannis Metaxas and Adolf Hitler. It is unclear whether the group subscribes to the same ideas of racial inequality as the Nazis, but either way, it is flirting with the boundaries of anti-Enlightenment thought, which makes it not only reactionary in the political sense, but also according to the meaning we have been using here.

It should go without saying at this point that since the group also relies heavily on nationalist sentiment (a product of modern thought) as well as acquiescence to a democratic system, it is also heavily modernist. because of this, Golden Dawn is perhaps the closest thing to a true reactionary modernist movement in Europe today (at least, among notable political parties).

The comparison between ISIS and Golden Dawn is very interesting. Both rely on a certain sense of popular legitimacy from the people whom they claim to represent (Muslims in the case of ISIS, ethnic Greeks in the case of Golden Dawn). ISIS claims support from Muslims who travel to join it, and Golden Dawn claims support from those who vote for it, but there is not so much difference between these two approaches (voting with a ballot versus as opposed to voting with one's feet). The main point of departure is that ISIS is religious/political reaction, whereas Golden Dawn is an ethnic/political reaction, but though this contributes to various surface differences, the underlying principles are not so different.

Additionally, there is the Russian Bear, clawing and growling and making moves to suggest that it has every intention of asserting itself. Russia is no fan of the current world order, and certain of the measures it has taken in recent years (i.e. passing laws against the teaching of minors about homosexuality) have been enacted as a way of returning to a more traditional society. It is certainly reacting against the current world order, though there is no sign that Russia (or perhaps more accurately, the Russian government) is becoming anything near reactionary modernist as of this writing.

These are simply the a few cases that show strong hints of reactionary modernism, however. What might a true reactionary modernist movement look like in Europe (or even the United States)? It is hard to tell. Any reactionary modernist movement in the United States has one hurdle to get over: love of the US constitution, which is heavily rooted in Enlightenment principles. Anyone in the United States wishing to turn back the clock is likely to appeal to constitutional principles, which precludes them from being reactionary in the sense of opposing the ideals of the Enlightenment.

For a reactionary modernist movement to arise in the United States, it would have to reject American history and explicitly reject the US constitution. It is for this reason that I predict

that if a reactionary modernist movement arises in the United States, it will be very reactionary indeed.

Section IV: Final Thoughts on Reactionary Modernism

One of the things we are taught in high school is that many people have a fundamental misunderstanding of one the principles of evolution. Because of this, it is not uncommon to hear people describe certain animals as more evolved than other animals. This is not quite correct, as each type of organism has been evolving for the exact same time from the exact same cell billions of years ago. No creature can be more evolved than another, as each has been evolving for the same amount of time.

It is true, of course, that some creatures can be larger or more complex than another and can be adapted for different environments, but this is not a reflection of how long they have been evolving, but rather, how they have been evolving overall.

Contrary to popular misconception, ideas are not any more or less evolved than each other. The lineage of each and every idea that exists today has been percolating for just as long as the intellectual lineage of every single other idea in existence. To claim that any one idea is more evolved than any other is to evince a fundamental misunderstanding of the way that ideas evolve in just that same way that to claim that any one animal is more evolved than another demonstrates a fundamental misunderstanding in the way that living organisms evolve.

To make this point very clear, ideas are not more evolved than one another, they are just evolved in different ways and have evolved in response to different contexts.

Bearing this in mind, we now understand why claiming that Reactionary Modernism is just a defective, less-evolved branch of modernity is a grievous error. Reactionary Modernist

movements are products of modernity just as much as any other modernist movements and they are just as adapted for a modern context as any other modernist movement.

We will see new reactionary modernist movements arise in the future. We will see this happen because the timing is right and reactionary modernist movements will be able to take advantage of arising circumstances.

I stated earlier that the paradox of reactionary modernist movements is their attempt to synthesize the reactionary and the modern (assuming that these can even be distinguished...if they cannot, the paradox vanishes, and we should not overlook the implications of this), but instead of making people question the ideology, this merely seems to serve as fuel on the fire, energizing and driving the movement. Why should this be?

One explanation is that such a paradox is a barrier that keeps out thinking people and brings in the zealots who are willing to act without thinking. This is an incredibly unsatisfying answer, and one that I think lacks explanatory power. ISIS has been demonstrating incredibly social media savvy, the Iranian regime has skillfully played the US in the latest rounds of nuclear negotiations, and many German intellectuals willingly joined the Nazi party. One of the most famous of these was the philosopher Martin Heidegger, but we must not also forget that after WWII, the US made a tremendous effort to gather up many of the Nazi rockets scientists who has been working on the V2 program so that they could build our moon rockets. Given the propensity of reactionary modernist movements to include many intelligent and thoughtful people, it seems incorrect to assert that only people who do not think are inclined to join reactionary modernist movements.

We also cannot rule out what has been mentioned before: that when it comes to reactionary modernist movements, it can sometimes be difficult to tell when the reactionary and the modernist begin and end. Do they blend into each other, or are they perhaps not quite so different after all, like two sides of the same coin? This leads us to a most important question: is

modernism itself reactionary? This is an important question, one that we should hold onto for a moment. We shall return to it very soon.

Perhaps the energy of reactionary modernist movements is beyond what we have the academic and intellectual tools to conceptualize. Perhaps it is the tension between the reactionary and the modern that drives them, but perhaps it is something more. Perhaps reactionary modernist movements are able to give people an ideology that is more compelling to believe in than the alternatives, whatever they may be. This seems to have been the case somewhat with the Nazis, and it certainly seems to be true to a certain degree with ISIS. Yet, this too seems to be an insufficient explanation.

Of course, it remains a possibility that the only reactionary modernist movements that have been studied and classified as such are those that have succeeded (at least, to a certain degree). This seems to be a better explanation than most, but even this seems not capture a complete explanation.

It is now that we return to the idea that we teased earlier. It is the idea that modernism itself may be reactionary, and that modernism itself was developed as a reaction against previous understanding. Under this conception, reactionary modernism is so energetic when it arises not only because it is a product of modernity, but also because modernity itself is reactionary, and reactionary modernism itself captures that essence better than any other type of modernity.

It is at this point that we might speculate that the concept of reactionary modernism has been imperfectly designed. One of the key themes of modernity is its implicit self-reflection on modernity. A significant aspect of this is the reaction against the ideals of the Enlightenment, which is a key aspect of what we might call "modernist" thought. Thus, if we take "reactionary" to mean "anti-Enlightenment", we are forced to accept that there is a part of modernism that will always be reactionary.

Applying this to the concept of "reactionary modernism", we are faced with a dilemma. Does this not imply that reactionary modernism is redundant, as all modernism is partly reactionary? We are saved, however, by that one word: *partly*. Because the reactionary aspect of modernism does not comprise the entirety of modernism, the concept of "reactionary modernism" is not wholly redundant, but it merely indicates a type of modernism that emphasizes the anti-Enlightenment aspect a bit more than other strains. We can still call ISIS "reactionary modernism", and that still means something.

That said, can we not think of perhaps a better label for ISIS, if only for the interest of supreme accuracy? I think we can. It is clear that ISIS is modernist, and so we achieve greater precision by conceptualizing it as within the confines of one of the more reactionary branches of modernism.

There is one possibility that screams for engagement. The Romantic movement arose as a reaction to the Enlightenment. Instead of placing faith in reason as the guiding quality of man, Romanticism instead elevated the expression of emotions, the ideals of sacrifice and heroism, and the rejection of established social norms. It makes far more sense to view ISIS in this vein, and the term itself seems to hit at a far deeper understanding of the group than "reactionary modernism".

It is in this vein that we shall attempt a reclassification of ISIS. Reactionary modernism has served as a good starting point, but in the end, it does not seem sufficient to encapsulate all that makes this movement unique. Using the idea of ISIS as a Romantic movement as our base, we shall not attempt to construct a brand new classification for ISIS. Though it might initially seem unique to this organization, there is no reason why it could not also be applied to other movements that fit the same mold, if the need ever arises.

There are many strains of Romanticism, and it would be incorrect to say that ISIS is descended from any of them. It comes from a very different cultural context and derive from its

own ideological predecessors. However, insofar as there is a certain essence that resonates with Romantic ideas, it is not unjustified to classify ISIS under the Romantic label.

ISIS is not a "happy" type of Romanticism, however. It does not focus on love or nature or great stirrings of ebullient sentiment. It places great emphasis on death and martyrdom. It dreams of the apocalypse and the end of the world. These motifs line up most closely with the aesthetics of the Dark Romantics, who delved into themes of sin and death. To call ISIS "Dark Romantic" does not seem out of place at all. Indeed, it seems rather fitting.

Is this our final answer? Does ISIS constitute a breed of Dark Romanticism? I believe it does. I believe that ISIS is in fact a sort of technologically-savvy, media-savvy Dark Romanticism. Going even further, I posit that this savvy is not merely an interesting quirk, but also essential to our classification.

One of the most famous subgenres within science fiction is "cyberpunk", which focuses heavily on themes such as the role of technology in social change, dark and dystopian futures, and disgruntled, malcontent protagonists who often feel a sense of rebellion towards established societal structures. What makes cyberpunk so interesting for our purposes here is that it is an apt description, in many ways, for ISIS, which draws upon socially-disaffected young men via media imagery and uses social media in innovative ways to advance its goals.

Putting all of these factors together, it seems proper to say that ISIS is not merely a form of reactionary modernism, but can additionally be described as a breed of "Cyberpunk Dark Romanticism". Its powerful romantic urges are channeled into a focus on death, war, and the apocalypse, which evokes the obsession with sin and death of the Dark Romantics. The romanticism of ISIS is distinct in its Islamic flair (to say nothing of a heavy saturation of the eschatological), but it still retains an essence that resonates deeply with the sentiment of the Dark Romantics. This sentiment is layered with a heavy reliance upon and gaming of digital

technology by those who are actively rebelling against established forms of society, a trait that infuses ISIS with a heavy dosage of the cyberpunk.

This realization is tremendously exciting one, for it seems to capture the true essence of ISIS far better than any previous classification. It is also where the real work of understanding begins. The development of the idea of Cyberpunk Dark Romanticism as an intellectual tool to understand ISIS grants use a frame through which we can come to comprehend their actions, but this is still only a first step on the road to a compete understanding of this group. There is much left to do.

Finally, let us return to the subject of reactionary modernism for a few concluding words. Reactionary modernism as a concept must be sharpened in order to hold better descriptive power. Still, those movements that we might describe as "reactionary modernist" do seem to have something to them, so it might be premature to throw out the concept entirely. Reactionary modernist movements remain unique ground for intellectual examination, and not just because so few examinations have been conducted that examine them as reactionary modernist. They are a phenomenon that is little know, often misunderstood, and likely to become all the more frequent in the future. The lack of proper scholarly analysis on the matter is an egregious oversight, one that I hope this thesis has taken a small step towards correcting.

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