

Ideology, Islam and Obama: Going to War on a Misunderstanding

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Global Research, September 19, 2014

Theme: [Religion](#), [US NATO War Agenda](#)

In-depth Report: [SYRIA](#)

“In conclusion, neither ISIS, nor John Kerry nor al-Azhar and certainly not the Saudi ruling dynasty speak on behalf of the ‘true Islam.’” – As’ad AbuKhalil, Sep 15, 2014

They are all rounding it up, but the criticism about the Obama administration’s specific understanding about its cavalry charge against the Islamic State has kept the political scene busy for the last few days. What, exactly, are the confused members of the White House leadership and staff up to?

Obama’s own statement at issue is that “ISIL is not ‘Islamic’.” The presumption here is that religions exclude violence, which is tantamount to saying that the religions of the Book were all, from the start, peace loving experiments of the human spirit. “No religion condones the killing of innocents, and the vast majority of ISIL’s victims have been Muslim.” The logic, taken to its absurd end, implies that a state like Israel would not be Jewish even as it bombs Gaza to smithereens. This is bound to surprise even the less convinced members of the Knesset.

Obama’s statement on the Islamic State forces involves the usual tender jabs that one has come to expect from Presidential rhetoric, certainly of the weeding sort. Be careful to delegitimise a political force, not a religion – after all, the Pew Research Centre suggests that Islam is gaining adherents at breakneck speed.

Be careful to highlight the nasty, the impudent and the vicious aspects of the pretenders – for the Obama administration, these people are merely head sawing murderers in fancy dress rather than ideologues with any genuine claim to religious credit. He doesn’t even want to give them credit for actually being serious. It is a policy that has currency with such individuals as Alan Noble, co-founder and managing editor of Christ and Pop Culture. “They depend on ‘the feeling of Muslims that we belong to them’, but if these terrorists are seen as pariahs, heretics, they lose their appeal.”[1]

There is also another point Obama has stressed. He has shown a certain reluctance to use the term “Islamic state”. “And ISIL is certainly not a state. It was formerly al-Qaeda’s affiliate in Iraq, and has taken strife of sectarian strife and Syria’s civil war to gain territory on both sides of the Iraq-Syrian border.”

Shades of the disastrous American involvement in Vietnam come to mind – one where the war makers in Washington proved deeply unclear about the most basic lexical constructions. Could it be Viet Cong, Viet-Minh or a trendy nickname? If one is engaged in a war, it might help to identify some correspondence between word and reality – a disjuncture between the two might excite a numb poststructuralist junkie, but hardly a superpower bent

on world policing.

Zack Beauchamp, writing in Vox, began a piece with the muddying suggestions of what name to use in this enemy Washington is eager to stop. “The Islamic State in Iraq and Syria.... wait. Stop. I was going to start describing it, but I got hung up on the name. That’s because the question of what to call the militant group operating in Iraq and Syria is extremely controversial.”[2]

Beauchamp also gets excited by what exactly constitutes “al-Sham”, the linguistic limb that seems to be distorting the entire animal that is ISIS or ISIL. Some in the traditional European orientation go for “the Levant”; Syrian journalist Hassan Hassan suggests that the common Arabic appellation here is narrower – one confined to Syria.

The boffins of the US press establishment have tended to shine in speculation and ignorance. This is to be expected – if the President bungles, the press will duly follow. Chuck Todd at *Meet the Press* thought he had indulged in something of a brainwave when suggesting that Obama prefers ISIL to ISIS for one obvious reason – the former ignores the Syrian sting in the organisation’s tail.[3] When it came to Rwanda, the Clinton administration avoided the ‘g’ (genocide) word, fearing the pressures of the Genocide Convention. Now, Syria is being avoided like the rhetorical plague.

Harris Faulkner of Fox News offered a zany interpretation on *Outnumbered* running counter to the trimming version offered by Todd: “Levant is a bigger territory. That’s why they want to embrace the name and it includes many, many more countries than just Syria.”[4] Sheer, geographically aware genius.

There are legitimate claims that Obama did not merely misstep, but fell flat on his face.

For former M-16 agent Alastair Crooke’s claim is that Obama has stumbled into an ideological morass by hoping to disentangle a type of Islam from, well, a type of Islam. For one, there is no ‘true Islam’ within the confines of a religion that wears numerous “faces”. [5]

What Obama seems to have missed is that paradox, claims Crooke, of the Wahhabists – that they, in their dead certainties, claim to be the only true Islamists on a rather confused bloc. The messy is rendered certain, maintained by assumptions of fanatical virtue. But even more importantly, the protean variations of Islam are repudiated in favour of a clear message. “Wahhabis claim,” argues As’ad AbuKhalil, “that they represent the ‘true Islam’ when the strength of Islam throughout the ages is that there is no such thing as ‘the true Islam’.”[6]

Such is the point – for AbuKhalil, it is the infantile idea enrapturing American pundits that Islam is easily captured by a spatial, geographical metaphor. “For Western media, Islam is an office with fancy headquarters where bureaucrats issue fatwas around the clock.” It is no such thing, mind bending in its variability and disagreements, and whole heartedly at odds with notions of a supreme, illuminating truth. That is not something the President wishes to engage in – after all, Washington is very much an item with those problematic Saudi Wahhabis. They claim to know something we don’t.

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Notes

[1] <http://national.deseretnews.com/article/2332/americans-link-violence-with-muslims-->

[but-obama-says-isil-is-not-islam.html](#)

[2] <http://www.vox.com/2014/9/17/6259923/isis-isil-the-islamic-state-daesh-what-is-isis-why--does-obama-use-isil>

[3] <http://www.mediaite.com/tv/chuck-todd-knows-why-obama-prefers-isil-to-isis/>

[4] <http://www.mediaite.com/tv/foxs-harris-faulkner-obama-tipping-his-hat-to-isis-by-calling-them-isil/>

[5] http://www.huffingtonpost.com/alastair-crooke/obama-isis-not-islamic_b_5843830.html

[6] <http://english.al-akhbar.com/content/which-islam>

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