Much has been written about the rise and expansion of the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) or ISIS (Islamic State of Iraq and Syria) – hereinafter referred to interchangeably as ISIL and ISIS – since its emergence, and analyses are being published non-stop. The facile utilization of cultural interpretations to explain such phenomena, connecting the development of ISIL with Arab-Islamic culture, is common. There have been widespread attempts by some racist self-proclaimed Arab nationalists, based on ‘orientalist’ concepts, to connect it to ‘Bedouin culture’. All these analyses have neglected the existence of many other factors that contributed to the development of this group, the least significant of which was the cultural factor. Recognizing the difference between the causes of the emergence and existence of ISIS in Arab political arenas, and its practices – of which the latter can be explained by its ideological formation – is essential. This article focuses on two particular aspects that characterize ISIL: its success in annexing large geographical areas inside Iraq and Syria; and the colossal level of violence the group exercises against its enemies, and against unarmed, innocent people, far exceeding that of other armed groups in the region on many levels. It also addresses two key factors that help shed light on what instigated the emergence, expansion and even ability of this group to attract cadres and supporters from within and beyond the Arab countries.

**Keywords:** ISIS; Wahhabism; takfir

In addition to their shortcomings at the international level and their denial of dignity to their citizens, Arab states have been unable to build institutions that incorporate all social sectors. They have also failed to find an identity that is able to achieve social cohesion, while submitting to the ruling regime, which practices tyranny and multiple forms of corruption. All this has led to the development of non-state actors, working either to protect the interests of certain social groups and communities or to confront state violence. Armed groups in Arab states – one of which is ISIS – fall within this framework, and their existence is an expression of the states’ inability to represent the interests of citizens. Despite the collapse of their legitimacy also being caused by domestic and international factors, it is, nonetheless, necessary to highlight two others that have brought about the existence of ISIL, and other violent groups, in the Arab region.

Firstly, the Arab world is currently undergoing a phase where states are failing and are unable to fulfil the role and responsibilities required of them. They have challenged neither Western hegemony nor Israeli occupation; rather, they have submitted to both in
many instances, resulting in the formation of the Lebanese and Palestinian resistance as a reaction to Arab states deserting the battlefield. In their inability to serve their citizens, they have repeatedly taken recourse to violence against certain social groups and communities to quell unrest. This factor has contributed to groups emerging as a reaction to state violence, that have, in turn, also adopted violent methods.

Secondly – notwithstanding the role played by the United States in creating the jihadi groups in Afghanistan – groups such as al-Qaida and ISIS are a reaction to unfair globalization. American and Western oppression of the rest of the world creates reactions that take on violent forms. Such reactions can take on a spiritual character to justify violence in the face of tyranny and injustice, which is what the German philosopher Jürgen Habermas noted in his speech on the events of 9/11 (Borradori 2003). He attributes al-Qaida’s violence to political and economic factors, rejecting cultural interpretations used by writers such as Samuel Huntington. Habermas holds unbridled capitalism and the hierarchic nature of global society accountable for the emergence of such levels violence.

The rise of Takfiri groups is not actually caused by the fact that a specific historical text that promotes such tendencies exists, but is rather caused by political and economic conditions that render possible the utilization of the existing text, to rally and mobilize. This does not undermine the importance of studying the ideological composition of ISIL or understanding its connection with Wahhabism, in trying to make sense of this group’s practices, and course of action. However, there is a need for caution while attempting to comprehend the ideological foundations of violence, to avoid falling into the trap of branding it a ‘Salafi-Wahhabi’ phenomenon. It is important not to disregard the different motives of violent action, and the causes behind the rise of violent non-state groups, nor to lose sight of the enormous amount of violence perpetrated throughout history – especially in the West. Equally, to overlook the gruesome violent acts, supported by varying religious, nationalist or ‘civilizational’ rationales, and documented in many books including Moneer Al-Akash’s three-volume *The Right to Sacrifice the Other: The American Genocides* (Al-Akash 2002) – acts which have neither been photographed nor posted on YouTube – would render invalid an objective approach to evaluating the phenomenon of violence.

When historical facts are ignored, whether intentionally or not, the display of disgust in the Western media and the Arab journalists and intellectuals who echo them over crimes perpetrated by ISIS, and the suggestion that ISIS is a historical exception, seems disproportionate. In order to mobilize people against ISIS, given the perceived threat it poses against them, the regional regime-sponsored media outlets distort and exaggerate the group’s crimes when fabrications are not necessary, since this group publishes its own crimes. The media attacks on ISIS also serve to enhance the image of groups supported by these regimes.

As a point of history, it is important to point out that Wahhabism, after the Battle of Sabilla (1929), between King Abdulaziz and his loyal Wahhabi ulema (religious scholars), on one side, and Ikhwan man ta’a Allah (the Brothers of One who Observed God, also known as the Ikhwan),1 on the other, became divided, as a concept, into two strands: one pragmatic the other radical. The Ikhwan helped Abdulaziz annex large territories in the Arabian Peninsula and helped him defeat Ibn Rasheed, governor of the region of Hai’il and the Sharifs of Hejaz. This group’s devotion, however, to the Wahhabi principles they learned, and their desire to expand into Iraq, and the continuation of the Jihadist phase, clashed with the king’s desire to adhere to international order, and strike an alliance with powerful actors in the region, such as Britain. This
led to a confrontation between an approach that sought to uphold Wahhabi principles, and one that sought to alter it in accordance with the ruler’s vision; the latter approach is represented today by the official religious institution in Saudi, and, as declared by the Kingdom’s Grand Mufti, Sheikh Abdulaziz Al-Sheikh²: ‘ISIS is the number one enemy of Islam.’

The issue being highlighted here is the connection of ISIS to unaltered Wahhabism, as prescribed by Sheikh Mohammad bin Abdelwahhab, rather than to the ‘altered’ Wahhabism of Saudi religious institutions. An essential aspect of the confusion in comprehending the Wahhabism of ISIS is the link to the heirs of Wahhabism in Saudi Arabia today, whom ISIS sees as having deviated from the pure Wahhabi approach.

**The sheikh is the emir**

Despite it being true that there are ideological similarities between ISIL and the original Wahhabism, the foundation of the first Saudi state, which Mohammad Abdelwahhab had contributed to, is different from the foundation of the ISIS state. It is even different from that of the third and current Saudi state, founded by King Abdulaziz. The first Saudi state was founded upon the historical alliance between the sheikh and the emir – Mohammad bin Abdelwahhab and Mohammad bin Saud – an alliance made at a meeting between the two men in Diriyah. Uthman ibn Bishr, one of the most prominent historians of the first Saudi state and prominent in the development of the Wahhabi Da’wah (mission), states in his book ‘Unwan Al-Majd Fi Tareekh Najd (Symbol of Glory in the History of Najd) that Emir Mohammad ibn Saud told the Sheikh:

‘I [promise you] a land better than yours, and [I promise you] glory and grace.’ To which the sheikh replied: ‘And I promise you glory, empowerment, and a manifested victory. And this is the word of Tawhid for which all messengers called. Those who hold on to it, work by it and support it will govern the land and the people. As you see, Najd and its surrounding territories are drowning in polytheism, ignorance, division, and inner conflict, thus I hope you, and your offspring after you, would be an Imam around whom Muslims will gather.’ (Ibn Bishr 1983, I, 24)

This dialogue testifies to a coupling of the da’wah and the state. Ibn Abdelwahhab talks about victory, governance and the Imamate where he hopes to find a state that supports his da’wah. This is an indication that he was not content simply with calling for what he sees as religious reform, but was also looking for a political entity with a missionary character. It would also indicate, according to Ibn Abdelwahhab’s view, that there was no choice but for the da’wah to be supported by the force of the state, and that the victory of the da’wah would not be achieved without state support. Here we see the vision of ISIS and Wahhabism intersecting, where the latter hopes to establish a Tawhid-supporting state,³ the difference being that Ibn Abdelwahhab was looking for a political ally with whom he would share power.

Ibn Abdelwahhab’s vision of the state was of a power-sharing arrangement between two parties: the sheikh and the emir, in which the sheikh would manage religious affairs and the emir would manage political affairs, without invalidating each other’s spheres of responsibility. Nonetheless, this would operate without defining each other’s limits. This constituted an alliance between the spiritual authority and the temporal authority, where the former gives legitimacy to the latter, and the latter gives the former the ability to extend its influence and spread its ideas in the public domain without any competition.
In the case of the third Saudi state, the concept of power-sharing disappeared, as there were no sheikhs and emirs sharing influence, but rather Abdulaziz bin Saud was alone in the picture as king. It is true that he raised the banner of faith and allied himself with Ibn Abdelwahhab’s lineage of ulema, in addition to utilizing Wahhabism for rallying and mobilizing for the purpose of unifying the peninsula, but the narrative of the third state’s foundation – as it was produced after it was founded – centres around a man taking back the rule of his ancestors. This time, however, the ulema did not share authority after the state was founded, but were still influential, privileged and enjoyed a high status. They provide the state legitimacy, but are not full partners, unlike Ibn Abdelwahhab, since the latter was a true partner in governance with Mohammad ibn Saud and his son, Abdulaziz, who succeeded him. Uthman bin Bishr describes the influence of Ibn Abdelwahhab, saying:

Khums, almsgiving and whatever comes to Diriyah, whether little or great, are paid to [Sheikh ibn Abdelwahhab], which he utilizes as he pleases. Neither Abdulaziz [ibn Mohammad ibn Saud] nor anyone else can take any of it without Ibn Abdelwahhab’s permission. He has binding authority, can give and take, delay or hasten. Neither Mohammad ibn Saud nor his son Abdulaziz can lead an army, or issue an order, without taking his advice. (Ibn Bishr 1983)

The influence of scholars in the third and current Saudi state faltered over time, while, in parallel, Islamist activists and Islamic opposition movements, in general, Jihadist or non-Jihadist, are reasserting the demand for an alliance between the sheikh and the emir, through consolidating the role of the ulema in administrating the public domain and monitoring all social activity. This divergence between the first and third states, in terms of the role of the ulema and the extent of their influence, changes the representation Jihadists have of both, as they see the first as a purely Islamic model, while the third, for various reasons, is met with Takfir.4 This is a perfect illustration of ‘pure’ Wahhabism rejecting ‘altered’ Wahhabism, the latter of which allied itself with King Abdulaziz and accepted his policies of putting a halt to Jihad (struggle), recognized international order and other aspects that are divergent from radical Wahhabi views.

ISIS diverges from the foundations of both the first and third states. It rebels against the Wahhabi approach of looking for a political ally, with whom the scholar shares full powers, as in the case of Mohammad bin Saud of the first Saudi state, or an ally that would guarantee him influence within his rule, as in the case of Abdulaziz’s Saudi state. In his vision of the ‘Islamic state’, Sheikh Abu Baker Al-Baghdadi (leader of ISIS) would be not only emir but also caliph. He and his followers are not looking for a political supporter with whom they would make an alliance. They do not contemplate using the power-sharing duality of the sheikh and the emir, since the sheikh can, himself, be the emir. He can have both temporal and spiritual authority; he, along with sheikhs in the state’s leadership, can legislate and implement laws.

This is an important difference in their vision of the state and the role of the ulema within it. Al-Baghdadi and Al-‘Adnani, along with their companions, did seek a wali aamr (ruler) to whom they would pledge allegiance, so that he would spread the call of Tawhid; rather, they tackled this issue themselves, and thus decided to establish the state, rule it and oversee its expansion. They did not confine themselves to a legislative role in a state led by another person who might deviate from their goals, nor did they accept a state where the emir takes the role of the sheikh, as they had seen in the
example of the third Saudi state. This is considered a big transformation in the Wahhabi theory of state.

An internationalist organization seeking to create a caliphate

When comparing the original Wahhabi movement with ISIS, it is necessary to note the difference between their target audience in terms of mobilization and rallying for battle. In the case of the original movement, the population of the Najd region was the target audience. It depended on fighters from Najd to expand the area of the state. ISIS, however, is similar to the Ikhwan in its composition, in that it depends on a Bedouin popular base and on social sectors located in the Syrian desert. ISIS differs from the Ikhwan in that it recruits fighters from all over the world, making it an international organization, whereas the Wahhabi movement operated at a local level.

Historical conditions must, of course, be taken into account when considering this difference. It may have been the case that if the Wahhabi movement had had the ability to recruit individuals from all over the world, using modern telecommunication methods, it would not have hesitated to do so. The Wahhabi movement wanted to expand and spread its message globally, and did not confine itself to the regions of Najd and Al-Ahsa. Rather, it aimed at extending to Yemen, Iraq and Hejaz since it targeted all Muslims as its audience.

This leads us to the concept of the caliphate, since it is clear that the concept ISIS invokes has been influenced by the literature of the post-caliphate-Islamist movement, which focuses on uniting divided Muslims under a caliphate. Wahhabism, on the other hand, did not call for a caliphate which competed with the Ottoman caliphate, nor did it designate Imam Mohammad bin Saud a caliph. Still, this is not a major divergence, since both movements believe in an expansion unlimited by geographical borders, which is what the Ikhwan adhered to, and thus were in conflict with King Abdulaziz’s approach. This conforms to the texts of the Wahhabi movement, which believed in an imperially modelled expansion, evoking Islamic conquests of the first caliphate era. Original Wahhabism believed in the expansion of the Tawhid state, according to its fighting abilities, with its ruler being imam to Muslims, while scholars of altered Wahhabism rejected the idea of resurrecting the caliphate. King Abdulaziz did not remain an imam after he settled his state’s border and established it; he became a king, which is a title that goes against all original Wahhabi literature that declares that only God is king.

On the question of expansion, ISIS is similar to original Wahhabism since it does not recognize borders and seeks to expand and rule all Muslims. The question of the caliphate, however, was not on the table at the time of original Wahhabism in the same way as it is now, a difference that is related to historical conditions.

Takfir as an incitement to combat

Takfir remains an essential component of Wahhabi ideology. It is a tool used for mobilizing and rallying against the ‘kuffar’ (infidels) who oppose the da’wah. ISIS uses this same tool to rally its members. Both the Wahhabi ideology and ISIS also agree on asserting the concept of Hijra (migration), dividing the world between Dar al-Islam (House of Islam) and Dar al-Kufr (House of Infidelity), where both encourage Muslim migration to Dar al-Islam, i.e. lands under Wahhabi control. ISIS extends Takfir to a point where it includes a great number of Muslims who come from Wahhabi backgrounds. For a full understanding of the Wahhabi discourse, Sheikh
Abdurrahman bin Qasim’s 16-volume encyclopaedia, *Ad’durar As’saniyah fi Al-Ajwibah An’naqdiyah* (The Shining Pearls in the Najdi Answers), offers an accurate account. His is a collection of the messages of Mohammad bin Abdelwahhab and preceding scholars of Wahhabi da’wah and their fatwas up to the 1970s.

*Takfīr* is strongly emphasized in Mohammad bin Abdelwahhab’s fatwas and messages. For example, he asserts that he did not know the meaning of *la ilah illa Allah* (There is no God but Allah) during his time as a *taleb elm* (student of religion), and that he had previously been guided towards his ideas on Tawhid and Shirk (polytheism), which is an assertion he applies to all the *ulema* of his time:

During that time, I did not know the meaning of *la ilah illa Allah*; neither did I know the meaning of Islam. This was before God bestowed His Grace. This was also true of my teachers; no man among them knew what this meant. If any of Al-‘Aridh’s *ulema* [Riyadh and its surroundings, also known as Al-Yamamah region] claims that he knew what *la ilah illa Allah* meant, or knew the meaning of Islam before this time, or claimed that one of his teachers knew what it meant, he, then, had lied, fabricated and given credit where credit wasn’t due. (Bin Qasim 1996, X, 51)

As can be seen in its literature, Wahhabi da’wah presents itself as a correction to widespread *jahiliyyah* (ignorance) and a revival of an extinct Islam; thus anyone who does not join its ranks is an infidel. This is why Ibn Abdelwahhab charged the Hanbali *ulema*, who opposed him or simply did not respond to his da’wah, with *kufr*. He even charged those who did agree with his charges with *kufr*.

Ibn Abdelwahhab used *takfīr* as a weapon against political opponents of Wahhabism. He charged the people of Ha’il with *kufr*. He charged them not because they practised what Wahhabism considers acts of *shirk* (idolatry), but because they did not agree with Wahhabism’s *takfīr* of the Turkish state and the people of Mecca. ‘Those who do not charge the *mushrikon* (polytheists) of the Turkish state and the grave worshipers,’ he said, ‘such as Meccans, with *kufr* […] is a *kafr* like them.’ He charged those who submitted to the Saudi state and then turned against it with *red’dah* (heresy). Husain bin Ghannam wrote that

many people from Wadi Al-Dawasir entered Islam, but some of them renounced it after six months. Thus Abdul-Aziz prepared an army, confronted them, tortured and killed many of them until they were humiliated and weakened, and asked to return to Islam. (Bin Ghannam 1994, 169)

ISIS also practices accusations of *red’dah*, especially with those who oppose it, or reject absolute obedience to its leadership. A case in point is what ISIS did to the Shu’aitat clan in Deir Al-Zour, where, after ISIS struck a treaty with the clan, a conflict occurred that led to the issuing of a sentence against them for being ‘an abstaining clan’, resulting in its men being killed, women displaced and homes demolished.

*Takfīr* here serves as an incitement to combat, and there is a deep connection between *takfīr* and fighting in Wahhabi discourse; the *takfīr* of people necessitates fighting them until they submit to the Tawhid-representing state, which is an approach ISIL practices unequivocally. Killing, in the original Wahhabi movement, was not limited to times of war against opponents of Wahhabism, but rather extended to assassinations of certain figures in times of peace. One example of this was the assassination of Uthman bin Mo’ammer, Emir of Al-‘Uuyayn (40 kilometres from Riyadh), while in his mosque after he finished Friday prayer for suspicion of conspiring against the Wahhabi da’wah,
despite the fact that he had shown support for it. This is similar to the assassinations perpetrated by ISIS of those it considers Sahawat (referring to Al-Anbar tribes who fought with the US army against Jihadis in Iraq in 2007) who were suspected of conspiring against it, even if they were, in fact, its allies.

_Tawhid_ to Wahhabism is embodied in the state; anyone who does not join the state, disown its enemies and consider them _kuffar_ is branded a _kafir_ too. As can be seen in the example of Ha’îl mentioned above, believing in Wahhabi _da’wah_ is translated into subordination to the state and disowning its enemies. Having any doubts implies _kufr_, and one who doubts the _kufr_ of a _kafir_ is also a _kafir_, according to Wahhabism. This is what ISIS leadership believes in, as they see the Islamic state they lead as having a monopoly over religious truth, and thus those who disobey the state have renounced their faith. This way any opposition to ISIL becomes _kufr_ or _red’dah_ and should be fought and killed.

The punishments meted out to _kuffar_ are not limited to slaughter; _takfir_ legitimizes the stealing of their money. Sheikh Abdul-Latif bin Abdurrahman Al-Sheikh, one of the second Saudi state’s _ulema_ and a descendant of Mohammad bin Abdelwahhab, issued a _fatwa_ legitimizing the taking of money from the Turkish military caravan and that of visiting Shi’ite caravans. This is mentioned by Bin Qasim, who confirms that:

Ibn Al-Hadhrami’s brigade was famous and well-known at the time of Prophet Mohammad (peace be upon him). The brigade targeted the camels of Quraysh, who, even with their _kufr_ and perversion at the time, were not as misguided as many of the military and the Rafidah visitors. One who argues over the legitimacy of taking the possessions of the soldiers and visitors and knows not what happened to people’s faith, needs to correct his own faith, review Islam from its origins, and comprehend the conflict between God’s messengers and their peoples. (Bin Qasim 1996, VIII, 353)

This makes bank robberies and other actions on the part of ISIS completely legitimate from their perspective. Nonetheless, this growing amount of _takfir_ does not imply that Wahhabism wholesale acknowledges the practice of _takfir_. Whenever Mohammad bin Abdelwahhab was asked about this, he would deny it and consider it a fabrication. Abu Omar Al-Baghdadi (Abu Baker Al-Baghdadi’s predecessor) endlessly repeated the same. But Wahhabism’s constant examining of what it means to be a Muslim leads to the conclusion that many Muslims are outsiders to the circle of Islam, and that Wahhabism, in tying Islam to Wahhabism’s interpretation of it, has embodied the religion in the _Tawhid_ state. Despite the fact that it does not charge all Muslims with _kufr_, ISIS considers many Muslims as _kuffar_. That being so is why the fighting and killing this entails against Muslims, more than any other group of people, is what is being witnessed today.

**Going back to the roots**

ISIS represents a return to Wahhabi origins, and thus drastically contradicts the current Saudi state. This invalidates any analyses connecting ISIS to Saudi Arabia, or to Saudi religious institutions. ISIS founded itself on principles it believes the Saudi state deviated from, and regards Saudi Arabia as yet another state that does not apply Sharia. That is why Saudi Arabia, as well as other countries in the region, looks at ISIS with great concern and is preparing to fight against it. The conflict between pragmatic Wahhabism and fundamentalist Wahhabism goes on.
Notes
1. The Arabic word *Ikhwan* meaning ‘brethren’ was a Wahhabi religious militia made up of nomadic tribesmen which formed a military force of the ruler Ibn Saud and played an important role in establishing him as ruler of most of the Arabian Peninsula in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia.
3. *Tawhid* is an Islamic doctrine related to ‘the oneness’ of God.
4. In Islamic law, *takfir* refers to the practice of excommunication; one Muslim declaring a non-Muslim or an apostate an unbeliever or *kafir* (pl. *kuffar*). The act that precipitates *takfir* is termed the *mukaffir*.
5. A province in Syria.

References