**ISIS vs. Islam**

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It is hard to know what to say in the wake of the terrible violence that recently engulfed Paris and Beirut. What follows is by no means an attempt to explain the attacks -- nor to justify them -- but rather to tease out some questions about the relationship between ISIS and Islam that seem particularly pressing now.

Ever since September 11, 2001, Americans (and many others) have been asking themselves whether Islam is a violent religion. In some ways, this is an easy question to answer. As [Reza Aslan](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PzusSqcotDw) said forcefully on CNN over a year ago, religions are not violent -- people are violent. I often invoke my colleague Rongdao Lai's lecture on militant Buddhist monks in places like Myanmar. Lai explained that even certain interpretations of Buddhism -- a religion associated in the United States with meditation, mindfulness, and the Dalai Lama's embrace of non-violence -- can, in fact, produce violent manifestations. Like Aslan, Lai emphasized that a religion such as Buddhism cannot itself be classified as non-violent; indeed, anything as vast and complicated as a religious tradition cannot be so definitively defined.

But even if we can say with some confidence that Islam is not a violent religion, a thornier question remains: to what extent is ISIS an authentic expression of Islam? There are, essentially, two poles on this issue. Many Muslim groups in America and Europe have vociferously denounced ISIS as un-Islamic (such as in the [press conference given by Nihad Awad](http://www.cair.com/videos/multimedia/13238-cair-s-executive-director-nihad-awad-condemns-terror-attacks-in-paris.html), the executive director of the Council on American-Islamic Relations). Some Muslims have called for avoiding the term "Islamic State" to describe ISIS, since doing so gives it the legitimacy of Islam. (The response of politicians like François Hollande and John Kerry to call it Daesh -- the Arabic acronym for al-dawla al-islamiyya bil-'iraq wal-sham -- is, however, hardly less Islamic in the original.) To these Muslims, ISIS is an aberration -- claiming to be Islamic but perverting the religion's core principles.

On the other end of the spectrum are those who see ISIS -- and other forms of militant Islamism -- as fundamentalist, but nonetheless authentic expressions of Islam. Perhaps the most articulate version of this position can be found in The Atlantic article ["What ISIS Really Wants"](http://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2015/03/what-isis-really-wants/384980/) by Graeme Wood. In this view, "the Islamic State is Islamic. Very Islamic," and "the religion preached by its most ardent followers derives from coherent and even learned interpretations of Islam." As Bernard Haykel, professor of Near Eastern Studies at Princeton University, explains, Islam is "what Muslims do, and how they interpret their texts." In other words, there is no single Islam, especially since Muslims recognize no central religious authority as do Catholics, but rather a shared Islamic textual tradition that is interpreted in myriad ways. In some sense, Haykel echoes an anthropological approach to Islam that sees multiple "islams" in the plural, rather than a single, unified tradition with a mainstream or orthodox core and various heterodox branches.

Ultimately, the distinction comes down to how one decides who is in and who is out of a religious tradition. In other words, Muslims like those involved in CAIR simply do not want to include a barbaric, violent organization like ISIS under the umbrella of Islam, for understandable reasons. The scholars quoted in Wood's article, on the other hand, feel that people who engage deeply with the Islamic textual tradition in recognizable ways and think of themselves as Muslims should unquestionably be considered Islamic.

Islam is not the only religion in which some of the faithful are deeply ashamed of their coreligionists. As an observant Jew, I am horrified by the barbaric and violent acts that have been committed in the name of Judaism. I could not disagree more with the interpretations of Judaism held by individuals such as Baruch Goldstein. But here in the US, I rarely have to defend myself as a Jew against accusations of belonging to a "violent religion," just as few Buddhists are asked whether Buddhism is violent when Buddhist monks attack Muslims in Myanmar. In other words, in the United States and in Europe, not all religions are considered equally guiltless.

In some ways, the distinction between ISIS as Islamic or not comes down to what you mean by "Islamic": is it what Muslims do, or are there things Muslims do that put them outside the boundaries of the Islamic tradition? Either way, there is no justification for labeling an entire religion as violent merely because some of its adherents embrace violence, as do those who see Islam as the problem. This is particularly crucial now, when the New York Times publishes a headline stating that ["After Paris Attacks, a Darker Mood towards Islam Emerges in France"](http://www.nytimes.com/2015/11/17/world/europe/after-paris-attacks-a-darker-mood-toward-islam-emerges-in-france.html?_r=0) and when the United States congress passes a [bill](http://www.nytimes.com/2015/11/20/us/politics/house-refugees-syria-iraq.html) to drastically tighten the screening procedures for Syrian refugees in what has been widely labeled the worst refugee crisis since WWII. Even if you consider ISIS Islamic, we must resist any temptation to conflate ISIS and Islam.

