

Barbara Kay: Understanding the jihadi mind (I hope this column isn't Islamophobic)

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Militant Video via Associated Press
An image from a video posted online by Communications Arm of Islamic State, circulating online Sunday Jan. 3, 2016

M-103 is a motion before Parliament that seeks to condemn (undefined) “Islamophobia” as a phenomenon distinct from hatred directed at individual members of all minorities. M-103 rests its case for particularity on wording from a petition, E-411, stating Islamist jihadis “do not reflect in any way the values or the teachings of the religion of Islam. ... They in no way represent the religion.”

The petitionists may sincerely believe in the truth of their statement. But they are indulging in pure wishful thinking, according to Graeme Wood, correspondent for *The Atlantic* magazine, Yale lecturer and author of the new book, *Way of the Strangers: Encounters with the Islamic State*.

Wood, an Arabic-speaking scholar of Islamic history, has spent years immersed in extended relationships with Islamic State (ISIL) jihadis in their “diaspora” — places like Egypt, Australia, America, England and Norway. In this instructive and often entertaining book exploring his experiences (an elaboration on his feature 2015 *Atlantic* magazine article, “What ISIS Really Wants”), Wood shares his impatience with the ostrich-like approach to contemporary jihadism exemplified in M-103.

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Wood writes: “The reality is that the Islamic State (IS) is Islamic. Very Islamic.” The strain of Salafist Islam jihadists embrace derives “from coherent and even learned interpretations of Islam.” Salafis — all jihadis are Salafist, but not all Salafists are jihadis, who represent, it bears emphasizing, tens of thousands out of 1.4 billion Muslims — “read the Koran attentively, and on certain matters, they occupy ground at least as solid as that of their opponents.” It therefore won’t do, he says, to pretend jihadists are misrepresenting their religion.

Political or psychological explanations for jihadism are all sidebars, Wood maintains: “The notion that religious belief is a minor factor in the rise of the IS is belied by a crushing weight of evidence that religion matters deeply to the majority of those who have travelled to fight,” just as Catholicism mattered to the Crusaders, Protestantism to 16th century Reformation warriors and Buddhism to Burma’s brutally anti-Muslim 969 movement.

The diverse portraits of Wood’s jihadist subjects are the heart of the book. Highly detailed though they are, the jihadist mindset will bewilder the average secular Westerner, who can no longer relate to notions like “the apocalypse” or “end times.” But along with restoration of the Caliphate, these concepts are the key to understanding ISIL.

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All visions of a coming apocalypse and end times share a common thread: they cannot take place until certain predicted events occur, and in a specific order. Wood notes, for example, that ISIL “spends less time complaining about Israel and the Jews than any other jihadist organization of the same scale.” Why? Partly because ISIL considers the leaders of Fatah and Hamas apostates. But mainly because the Koran’s apocalyptic texts dictate that the Jews’ fate is contingent on prior met conditions. First Jesus has to return and convert to Islam, ending Christianity; only then will the Jews be dealt with.

Every one of Wood’s jihadi profiles is fascinating. There’s Hasham Elmasry of Cairo, host of an Islamist TV show, formerly a high-end tailor in New York. For months Elmasry labours with excruciating patience to convert Wood, exhibiting no hard feelings when he fails. There is Musa Cerantonio of Footscray, Australia, who lives with his mom and obsesses on social media over the coming Caliphate. Musa claims to intend to join Islamic State in Syria, but always finds an excuse to stay far from the fray. There’s Abu Aisha in Oslo, genuinely puzzled by Wood’s revulsion for ISIL “killing, slavery, (and) amputations.” They are necessary, Aisha earnestly explains to Wood: “This is a war — and not a war we chose. We do this because we want to offer you something ... we want to see all human beings in Paradise. This is not a greedy religion.”

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But the most compelling story is that of Yahya Abu Hassan ibn Sharaf, who grew up as plain John Georgelas in Plano, Texas, the son of patriotic Americans of Greek descent. A convert to Islam, Yahya ended up as “the Islamic State’s leading English- language polemicist,” married a like- minded girl of 19, and with her, embarked on a decade of breathtakingly reckless jihadi adventurism, fecklessly endangering their four sons (now being raised by his parents). Their saga rivets and revolts the reader.

Of his subjects, Wood concludes, “I have come to think of them as sick romantics, a visionary company whose longing for meaning was never matched by an ability to distinguish good from evil, or beauty from horror” — a worthy insight, but one offering neither comfort nor imminent hope.

Wood’s book is informed, objective and educational. But is it also, according to those promoting M-103, “Islamophobic”? Freely inquiring minds need to know.

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