



The Case of Islamic State as a Renovative Totalist Movement

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ABSTRACT

This paper uses the concept of totalism to analyze the main features of Islamic State and thus the implications of containing and confronting it and its potential future offshoots. The first part of the paper deals with the origins and concept of totalism, depicting its main features and types. This part begins by briefly showing the main features of totalism, why it must be ultimately differentiated from totalitarianism. The second part of the paper explores the extent to which Islamic State conforms to the model of a renovative totalist movement and why terms such as political religion are unsuited for explaining Islamism and Salafi-Jihadist movements, including Islamic State. Due to the overall direction of its ultimate ideological aims and the way in which it pursues the total reconstruction of public and private life, Islamic State is then found to contain the main features of a militant, renovative totalist movement. Lastly, the paper argues that it is primarily this totalist nature of the movement which, together with total commitment to emulating what it sees as the essential early Islamic traditions and examples, contributes to its long-term resilience even in the face of overwhelming odds and military reversals.

KEYWORDS

Islamic State; renovative totalism; ideology; totalist movements; heterodoxy

This paper wishes to outline the usefulness of totalism as a neutral analytical tool for approaching the doctrinal core and actions of Islamic State, while also being applicable to other movements, whether militant or quietist in nature. As the term itself has a somewhat complex history and possesses certain variations dependent on the background of the researcher using it, the paper will provide its own definition and overview of the concept in a manner suited to the task at hand. Therefore, the first half of the paper introduces the relevant literature on the concept of totalism and Islamic State, while providing a definition of totalism. In addition to this, the main features of a totalist system are expanded upon, expanded upon, followed by a description of the three ideal types of totalism, namely, the renovative, utopian, and hybrid types. Also, a brief argument for the differentiation of totalism from totalitarianism has been inserted for methodological reasons.

The second half of the paper begins by briefly approaching the importance of totality for Islamic heterodoxies and by arguing that movements such as Islamic State should not be considered political religions. The paper then assesses the extent to which Islamic State fulfils the traits of a totalist movement and the type of totalism it can be associated with.

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