

Iconoclasm and the Islamic State  
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Primer II: Historical lineage

• ***What is the historical lineage for ISIS' brand of iconoclasm? How did we get from the Golden Calf to today? Is ISIS simply a latter-day Wahhabism?***

One should be careful of overly-neat historical lineages, and in [my book](#) I argue that while we can make many useful connections between groups of Islamic and Christian iconoclasts, we should remain wary of the risks of anachronism and clumsy causality.

If we are to talk of a historical lineage for the iconoclasm of ISIS we must address the common assertion that the iconoclasm of ISIS is an extension of Saudi Wahhabism. Before discussing the Wahhabi connection, I would like to make a couple of caveats. Despite its regular use in the media as a catch-all word to describe the actions of Islamic militants, “Wahhabism” is a problematic term. It applies to a specific chapter in Arabian history, following the emergence of the eighteenth-century cleric Muhammad ibn Abd al-Wahhab and his formal alliance with the al-Saud family. This alliance holds good today, with the Saudi royal family maintaining absolute rule over the kingdom and the descendants of al-Wahhab, the al ash-Sheikh family, remaining the ultimate religious authority. However, Saudi citizens and many academics reject the term as an invention of British colonialism, and prefer to speak of *al-muwahhidun*—that is, the proponents of *tawhid*, or “Unitarians.”

The Grand Mufti of Saudi Arabia has spoken against ISIS, calling it an enemy of Islam. Many in the commentariat consider this to be disingenuous, taking into account the strong links between ISIS and their Gulf Arab backers. But just as we should be careful of using catch-all terms like “Wahhabism” within an ahistorical context, so too should we resist painting Saudi Arabia only in the homogeneous colors of a theocracy. Jeddah represents a different culture from Riyadh. And unlike in Iran, social media like Twitter is not banned in Saudi Arabia—indeed, I have read exchanges on Twitter where young ISIS supporters have mockingly dismissed a Saudi cleric when he denounced their actions.

With these caveats in mind, however, a clear comparison between Wahhabism and ISIS can be made on the level of their iconoclasm. In both cases, the destruction of signs of *shirk* has been at the center of their territorial ambitions. In his Quranic commentary *Kitab al-Tawhid*, ibn Abd al-Wahhab emphasized verses which connect idolatry (*shirk*) and unbelief (*kufr*), thus describing the worship of Allah as synonymous with the destruction of idols. His early followers, in their desire to recreate an idealized first Islamic community, therefore destroyed the ‘idols’ of those local traditions throughout the Arabian peninsula that were deemed to deviate from *tawhid*. These ranged from pagan Arab objects, such as statues of deities and male palm trees believed to help fertility, to Islamic shrines in the holy cities of Mecca and Medina.

It should be remembered that in the eighteenth century, “Saudi Arabia” was not a unified state. Ibn Abd al-Wahhab and the al-Saud families came from the central desert area called Najd.

Mecca and Medina—the sites of the *Hajj* pilgrimage—were in Hijaz, ruled by a Hashemite king in a complex arrangement with the Ottoman Empire. Thus the Najdi rejection of diverse local traditions reflected a desire for unity not only in the theological approach to God but also in the political approach to land.

Iconoclasm represented a means of bridging the principles of theological and political unity, or *tawhid*. Aziz Al-Azmeh—who is excellent on this subject—has argued that the Wahhabi attacks on Mecca and Medina used the destruction of images and shrines in order to clear—literally—religious and political territory for the building of a revivalist Islamic community. This process culminated in the final conquering of Hijaz and control of the *Hajj* pilgrimage by Ibn Saud in 1925, followed by the destruction of the shrines in Medina's al-Baqi cemetery, including tombs of Muhammad's own family and companions.

If we to make a comparison between Wahhabism and ISIS, then, it needs to be according to these terms: the theology of attacking local practices deemed to practice *shirk*; and the politics of consolidating a territory for the pure practice of *tawhid*. On that level, a historical lineage can indeed be traced.

This lineage brings us back to the faultline of Syria and Iraq. Following the eighteenth-century Wahhabi-Saudi alliance, the Shia area of southern Iraq came under attack from the Najdi forces. According to both European and Arab sources, the Wahhabis sacked Karbala in 1802, killing many people and attacking shrines. These shrines included the tomb holding the body of the Shia Imam Hussein ibn Ali. Hussein's head, incidentally, was believed to be held in the Umayyad Mosque in Damascus, alongside that of the John the Baptist—a powerful reminder of the ancient religious pluralism in Syria and Iraq, and exactly why these places have long been iconoclastic targets.