

A Balanced Exposé? : ‘Capturing’ the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria

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Abstract

Documentaries about the outcomes of the tragedies in the Middle East have soared over the past few years; these have helped to highlight the plight of communities in the affected region. This essay is a review of a documentary that focused in ISIS and illustrated to what extent ISIS undermined the dignity of these communities. Though the documentary demonstrated the trauma encountered by some of the communities in this region, it also reflected the issues that were missed by the producers. Hence the key question in this essay: Was it a balanced expose?

Keywords: *ISIS, Middle East, Syrians, Christians, Yazidis, Documentary*

Introduction: The Festival and the Documentary

From the 7 until 16 April 2015 Botswana’s Ditswanelo (Botswana Center for Human Rights <http://www.ditshwanelo.org.bw/>) organized its ‘Annual Human Rights Film Festival’; the festival’s organizers screened the documentaries at the famous privately managed Maru a Pula School located near Gaborone’s city centre. During 2015 Ditswanelo celebrated its 15th anniversary under the able leadership of Alice Mogwe; an award winning pro-active human rights activist. For this festival, it had a series of documentaries of which Motjaba Masood’s (along with Amr Taki) – a (naturalized) British political analyst - 52 minute *ISIS (i.e. Islamic State of Iraq and Syria): Extremism?* was among those that were screened; this particular documentary was one that was funded and circulated by Ahlulbayt TV (<https://ahlulbayt.tv>) and is available online <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WVMFnESN1fg>;

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It should perhaps be watched in tandem with another co-produced Ahlulbayt production that is titled *ISIS: on the Frontline* (Directors: Amr Taki & Mustafa Masood 2015) as well as *The Rise of ISIS* (Director: Martin Smith 2014). This rhetorically titled documentary, which is essentially being assessed and reviewed in this essay, was screened on the festival's penultimate evening. On that night it attracted a reasonable crowd – approximately 80 people in all - who hailed from various backgrounds; most of whom had been keen to be enlightened about the beliefs and practices of this enigmatic scourge-like organization that has been running amok across Syria and Iraq.

The organizers requested Mr. Abdulkader Hussein, a well-respected history teacher at the Maru a Pula school, to moderate the evening's screening. Soon after the documentary was shown he immediately put out a disclaimer stating categorically that he was not there to answer questions but to provoke a discussion that would further problematize the issue of extremism and sectarianism; the main thrust of the documentary. He thus opened his presentation by asking the question that was formulated in the form of an acronym (i.e. WWMD?); this acronym he conveniently wrote on the white board to motivate the audience to fleetingly think what the question was that he posed. Now anyone who is familiar with the invasion of Iraq by the USA and its allies will remember that George Bush Jr's administration argued that Iraq stashed away 'Weapons of Mass Destruction' and it was for that reason that they decided to invade this country (see Carus 2012: 3-6; Cirincione et al 2004: 15-19). Though that was the case, the acronym did not mean: 'Where are the Weapons of Mass Destruction?'

The Moderator's Stimulating Question

The moderator constructed it in such a manner that it raised the following question: What would Muhammad (i.e. Prophet of Islam) [in these volatile circumstances] do? And he went on to associate the letter 'M' with other distinctive personalities by asking: What would he or - for that matter - Martin (Luther King) (d.1968) or Malcolm X (d.1965) or Mandela (d.2014) or Mahatma (Gandhi) (d.1948) do (in this situation)? Well with this thought-

provoking start he wrote a series of other words that were spelt with the letter ‘D’ on the board; the moderator’s long list, which included among others: demagogue and destruction, overlooked to insert the name Da’ish (or Daesh depending upon the way it's transliterated into English); this is a rather inconspicuous and obscure (Arabic) name that was given for this uncontrollable and irrepressible ‘Khaliphate’ organization (see Osman 2014: Caris & Reynolds 2014).

This organization, which was described by Alexander (2015) and others as a ‘sectarian *jihadi* group’, did not only tarnish the name of Islam as a peaceful religious tradition but it publicly portrayed Muslims as if they were and are a ‘blood-thirsty’ and ‘war-mongering’ group of believers (see Quilliam Foundation’s Shaykh Usama Hasan's interview). It is indeed this idea that reinforced notions of Islamophobia (Lambert and Githens-Mazer 2010; Martín-Muñoz 2010). Daesh aka ISIS, which was classified by the UN as a terrorist organization in 2014 (see www.counterextremism.com), ironically claimed that its leadership and its members followed Muhammad’s firm footsteps faithfully, and they further expressed the view that they determinedly pursued the idea of establishing and realizing Islam’s fundamental principles through the formation of an ‘Islamic State’! (see Sekulow and Ash 2014) to which Shaykh Mohammed al-Hilli, one of the UK-based Shi’ite theologians who was interviewed, retorted emphasizing that its an ‘un-Islamic state’. Now whether Daesh aka ISIS is really truthful to the faith that it purports to uphold and adhere to is something that the Masood documentary - to some extent - explored.

The AhlulBayt TV Documentary: *A Balanced Exposé?*

Since Ditswanelo slotted the various documentary films thematically, it inserted this particular documentary film alongside two other documentaries that were also screened at the 2014 Durban Film Festival (in South Africa) under the ‘Freedom of Expression, Association and Religion’ theme; the one was ‘Orania’ that was a German-produced film [Director: Tobias Linder 2012], and the other was ‘Word Down the Line’ that was a South African produced show [Director: Bobby Rodwell 2014]). Whilst Ditswanelo - and perhaps rightfully

so - considered ISIS' internationally mediated activities 'a pertinent topic' in its circulated pamphlet, one wonders whether it should have been regarded as 'a *thoughtful examination* of a movement which has managed to generate ire and occasional support from citizens across every corner of the globe' [this essayist's emphasis].

Basing oneself on the general contents and approach, one cannot fully agree with the pamphleteered observation; hence, the reason for raising a rhetorical question as part of this essay's title (i.e. *A Balanced Exposé?*). Setting that aside and relying exclusively on the media reports and ISIS' own reports (e.g. their glossy *Dabiq* propagandist [online] newsletter launched in June 2014), one cannot but agree and concur that much of the organization's actions have audaciously and shamelessly flouted (and continues to contravene) fundamental human (cum religious) rights laws (see Mike Shum et al's report/clip the 'Surviving an ISIS Massacre' 2014; AI 2014); an array of laws that has unambiguously been set out in the United Nations' 'Universal Declaration of Human Rights' charter (www.ohchr.org) as well as in the African Charter on Human and People's Rights (www.achpr.org) and Asian Human Rights Charter (www.humanrights.asia).

When one, however, evaluates this documentary's contents there are a few pertinent questions that one cannot side-step; they are: Why did Masood only interview mainly Shi'ite scholars? How come he only managed to track down one zealously devoted ISIS supporter who seemed to be more of a follower than a leading ideological member of this organization? What else should he have included in this documentary to have creative a balanced portrayal of developments in the Iraq-Syria region that ISIS daringly infiltrated? From whence did this insurrectionist organization emerge? On what basis did it stealthily emerge to create mayhem regionally? Why did it go undetected when so much intelligence networks operate in that region? And more importantly why has this organization caused so much mayhem and destruction in the region when it purported to be representing 'authentic' Islam? Taking into account these and other questions, the key question is: did Masood succeed in producing what may be regarded as 'a thoughtful examination' of this extremist and divisive *jihadi*

group? Though brief remarks had been offered in response to the last-mentioned question, most of these questions might not be satisfactorily answered in this essay because of space constraints; that being the case, an attempt will be made to provide some answers and perhaps raise a few more questions.

As already indicated, this documentary was produced by the Masood who lives in a country (namely, the United Kingdom) that guarantees its religious minorities (such as Jews, Muslims, Hindus et al) their ‘freedom of religion’; a key pillar that acts as a guide to everyone who lives within the state’s borders. Nonetheless, Masood saw the need to shed light upon ISIS’ despicable acts that have been and that are being perpetrated in the name of Islam and Muslims; a point that was made earlier. According to the festival pamphlet, Masood expressed ‘a need for all influential figures to join together to combat the scourge of ISIS and other extremist groups...’ Now for this documentary, Masood decided to select a number of interviews that hosted a few prominent UK based/born Muslim individuals; most of whom shared their thoughts concerning ISIS and Islam’s teachings/principles. Interestingly it was observed that many of them (e.g. Shaykh Mohammed Al-Hilli [www.alhilli.net] and Sayed Yousif Khoei [www.al-khoei.org]) came from the Shi’ite school; a representative theological school of which Masood is also a member.

Despite having undertaken such an important exercise (i.e. the interviews), the selective consultation approach somewhat disqualified this doccie as a fairly balanced one. In order for it to have reflected an evenhanded perspective, it should have interviewed other significant (non-Shi’ite) UK based/born commentators who have and continue to represent Britain’s Muslim society at different levels; especially individuals who characterize diverse theological and ideological strands of thinking. Here Masood should have interviewed individuals such as Tariq Ramadan - the Oxford University don (www.tariqramadan.com), Timothy Winters – the Cambridge University scholar (www.masud.co.uk), and Ziauddin Sardar – editor of *Critical Muslim* (www.ziauddinsardar.com); in addition to these well-known scholars he should have interviewed Ahmed Versi (the editor) of the widely circulated

online British *Muslim News* (www.muslimnews.co.uk), the director of the long-established Markfield (Leicester)-based Islamic Foundation (www.islamic-foundation.org) and a leading member of the London-based Islamic Human Rights Commission (www.ihrc.org); these individuals could have offered their temperate thoughts and polished perspectives on ISIS as an insurrectionist organization; and it would have been quite revealing and appropriate had Masood requested one of his interviewees to have compared ISIS – albeit briefly - to other extremist organizations such as Boko Haram (Nigeria) and al-Shabab (Somalia) that also negatively portrayed Islam and Muslims on the African continent.

In the documentary's opening scenes Masood provided a snapshot of a jubilant group of ISIS men who were joyously waving their guns in the air and driving brashly around in convoy to demonstrate their (temporary) victorious invasion of the Iraqi city Mosul. On the whole, the images cogently conveyed that ISIS was a well-armed; and all of these revealed that ISIS appeared to be well-funded (FATS 2015; Chethi Plethi 2015). Since this the case, another inter-related set of questions come readily to mind are: If the financial ISIS backers are the Saudis and Qataris, then why do they support ISIS financially? If these countries are giving ISIS the necessary assistance then are they also supplying them the sophisticated armory? In response to these questions a few conspiracy theories have circulated to give an understanding of developments regionally: the one is that Israel's Mossad has been acting in cahoots with the USA's CIA to create this relatively unknown extremist and divisive organization (see reports on the following sites: www.heavy.com; www.huffpost.com; www.arabist.net); and the other hypothesis is that the Saudis, who have been and are under USA's influence, have been ISIS' main financial backers – because it wanted to extend, on the one hand, its socio-political and religious authority and, on the other, to regionalize its *Wahhabite* ideology with the idea of countering Shi'ite influence (see Maitra 2014; and visit www.washingtoninstitute.org); this ideology, which has been geographically confined to Saudi Arabia only (Commins 2006), is a dogmatic creed that has been embedded in a theology that was further tied to a fairly restrictive *Hanbalite* jurisprudence.

Upon evaluation, one notes that no Wahhabi-oriented or Hanbali trained theologian was among those who had been interviewed for the Masood documentary. This would have been very revealing and informative because one might have got another point of view of the ISIS invasion of Iraq and Syria. Be that as it may, it is well nigh impossible to critically assess each of the interviewees' comments and all the relevant clips that appeared in this documentary. So for the purpose of this essay, a selective approach will be made adopted to illustrate why ISIS as an extremist, sectarian and divisive organization particularly its leadership should be taken to task and indicted for 'crimes against humanity'; the massacre of the 1700 Iraqi cadres may be used as evidence against ISIS. Nevertheless, for this essay three issues were identified and they were chosen in order to highlight (a) to what extent ISIS harassed religious minorities (such as Christians and Yazidis) in Iraq, to show (b) how ISIS' men forced vehicles off the road to check the drivers' theological identities and quizzing them in a somewhat undignified manner about Islam's fundamental aspects; and to exemplify (c) what caused ISIS to implement a caustic policy that caused the destruction of significant heritage sites in the region? Since these three cases are sufficient evidence to bring ISIS leadership to the book, the essay turns to each of them.

Mosul's Christians (and Yazidis): Their Usurped Properties

Early in the documentary Masood with the assistance of an interlocutor questioned an elderly Christian lady and her brother about ISIS' troublesome acts in their district in Mosul. According to their statements, ISIS rebels usurped their property claiming that it belonged to their (newly established) 'Islamic State'. The footage further highlighted the extent to which this traumatized elderly lady explained her condition and thoughts about the ISIS invasion; an event that they did not previously experience under Muslim governments. Masood should, therefore, have prefaced these interviews, with a socio-historical and religious comment about the Iraqi Christian community (www.icin.org.uk/information/history-christianity-iraq/). With this context as a backdrop, one would have gained a better understanding and insight regarding ISIS' debilitating effects on Iraq's religious minorities including the Yazidis and

others. Since Masood did not do this, one does not get an appreciative understanding of the Iraqi Christians' plight and, for that matter, the Yezidis predicament that Masood mentioned in passing when he interviewed Sajjad Jiyad who was leading a public 'Demonstration 4 Action' protest against ISIS.

Since the Yezidi religious community (www.yeziditruth.org), which remained unsurprisingly active for many centuries without being forced to convert to Islam by the respective the Caliphates (Umayyads, Abbasids or Ottomans), was not covered at all in this documentary, it would have been prudent for Masood to have done so for a number of reasons: The one is that though this community's tradition contains some Zoroastrian beliefs and practices, they do not sanctify or worship the 'devil' as some over-zealous and purist critics wish everyone to believe; and the other is that as a significant religious minority they have contributed substantially towards the national identity of the Iraqi society. Being a significant Iraqi community implies that the community like all other religious communities should be granted their God-given rights as enshrined in the various human rights charters. Sadly, this has not been the case since ISIS stepped into the region. ISIS has not only destabilized the region, but it has acted irrationally by putting to death many who did not identify with the ISIS cause; according to the BBC report at the end of April 2015, many Yezidi adherents were killed by ISIS forces (also see IIHLR 2015: Alexander 2015).

From the news reports and stories that have filtered through, the record reflected that many of these minority religious traditions seem to have suffered heavily at the hands of ISIS; and as a consequence of their ill-fated circumstances, they stood almost no chance of surviving or escaping ISIS governance. All of these reports have however been vehemently denied and rejected by Abu Rumaysah who was interviewed by Masood. In any case, their religious minorities' rights have been violated and there is ample evidence that may be used to prosecute ISIS leaders (and anyone associated with the atrocities committed by ISIS). Apart from the appalling actions of ISIS against these religious minorities, it appears that they have also adopted a similar hard-line attitude towards Muslims who were not Sunnis

particularly the Shi'ite communities. This documentary was therefore produced by Masood to demonstrate how the Shi'ite religious communities alongside other religious communities were indiscriminately tortured and executed by ISIS insurgents; the 'Syrian truck drivers' case is indeed one such example.

Syrian Truck Drivers: Theologically Incorrect Affiliation

Soon after the interview with Mosul's Christians Masood took the viewer to one of the main arterials; here he captured the scene of ISIS guards who stopped cars and trucks along the way. In this recording, the camera focused on a convoy of truckers who were forced to stop their long-trailer vehicles along the roadside. As these truckers descended from their vehicles, they were immediately asked by the rather arrogant ISIS soldier to show their ID cards and they were immediately interrogated about their theological affiliations; in other words they were asked whether they were Sunnis or Shi'ites; the ISIS footsoldier did not care much about the Shi'ites (popularly referred to as *Rawafid* [Eng. Rafidites]) or a person who belonged to any other religious tradition. ISIS leadership under Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi and Abu Musab al-Zarqawi took a firm anti-*Rawafid* position to such an extent that it was acceptable for ISIS soldiers to kill them because they have been classified theologically outside the fold of Islam! Consequently and in line with this stance, the (brainless) ISIS footsoldier calculatingly asked a few (silly) questions in order to verify whether these fellows belonged to either one of the specific theological camps; the shrewd soldier tested them by asking them about the number of prayer units that each ritual prayer contains. Unfortunately for these Syrian truck drivers, each of them gave incorrect answers.

As a result of their inaccurate responses, they were faulted for falsifying their religious identities and were instantaneously accused by ISIS of being polytheists! They were at once taken aside where the other ISIS men gathered. There they were forced to kneel down and were executed by the trigger-happy ISIS executioner. Now when returning to an earlier interview with Abu Rumaysah, the latter emphatically denied that ISIS killed Muslims; he diplomatically averred that they only countered those who opposed them, albeit violently.

Now if this is indeed the case, then it appears that each ISIS group has its own definition of who is a Muslim and who is not. Nevertheless the drivers' theological interrogation illustrated the following issues not underlined in Masood's commentary: the first is that the video recording underscored the soldier's myopic mind at work; the second showed the soldier's authoritarian and unseemly behaviour towards the truckers who considered themselves to be Muslims, and the third concretely illustrated how these Muslim truck drivers innocently revealed their ignorance about their religious tradition's teachings.

Sacred Heritage: Destroying Places Perpetuating 'Polytheistic' Practices

Before commenting on the third scene that took a photo-shoot of the mosque cum shrine that was destroyed by ISIS, it should be mentioned that in many of these regions Sufi or saintly figures were buried either next to or in the vicinity of the mosque with which he had generally been associated. So from the time of this saintly person's death the shrine has become a place of (minor) pilgrimage (Elias 2000). In other words, this saint's followers regularly visited his grave to bestow God's blessings upon him for the acts that he had performed during his lifetime; acts that bordered on near miracles or what may be considered divinely-guided deeds.

Unfortunately, in Saudi Arabia such places are frowned upon and usually destroyed; this is so because from their Hanbalite jurisprudential perspective and their Wahhabite notions of religious practices they categorized deeds as either permissible or rejectable. They therefore vehemently opposed from a theological perspective the existence of these types of places and associated them with acts of polytheism! (Moussalli 2009: 4). As a consequence of this theological cum jurisprudential position, ISIS members ruined and obliterated many Iraqi places of heritage and this included shrines and other related structures; incidentally this an issue that was cautioned by Al-Hamdani (2014) when he published his Iraqi Heritage Report. Even though ISIS defended its position jurisprudentially and theologically, its dastardly deeds demonstrated that they had no concern for historical relics and heritage sites

that have been recognized by international bodies such as the UN. ISIS spokespersons such as Abu Rumaysah saw no value in any of these structures and thus justified their acts.

Round-Up

All of these mentioned acts, which have been committed by ISIS' members, concretely demonstrated that their behaviour was out of tune theologically and ethically with Islam's fundamental ethical system. On this matter, Maulana Shahid Raza, the UK-based Muslim Shariah Council's Executive Secretary (www.shariahcouncil.org), unconditionally stated in his interview that ISIS 'slaughtered all human values' instead of upholding them, and it has 'nothing in common with the great Islamic moral and spiritual teachings of tolerance, love, peace and coexistence'; and another informant made the point that they essentially 'perverted the purity of the ... Islamic religion'. Related to this Yousif Khoei correctly commented that one should take away the qualifier 'Islamic' from the phrase 'Islamic extremists' and just refer to them as 'extremists'. Connected to these observations is an *ISIS Report Card* that was circulated by an anonymous author. This scholar/theologian issued a report that was based on *Shari'ah's maqasid*; that is on its six basic Islamic legal principles (namely, the protection of religion, life, mind, family, wealth, and character). After a brief evaluation and using these principles, he persuasively and convincingly argued that this 'Islamic Caliphate', which is still in the making, be viewed as a 'failed state' rather than a successful one (<http://surfingbehindthewall.blogspot.com/>).

Taking these comments into account, the following question naturally arises: if ISIS' acts and mannerisms are not in sync with Islam's basic moral teachings, on what basis can they describe themselves to be true 'soldiers of God' on earth? This announcement they made publicly as they chanted the *takbir* (i.e. the phrase 'Allahu Akbar' [i.e. God is Great]) and when they hoisted on their trucks the black flag; a flag that was emblazoned with the basic creed and one that was characteristic of the flag that the Abbasids raised when they toppled the last remnants of the Umayyad Caliphate many centuries ago (circa 750) in Khurasan (see Bahari & Hassan 2014). If one returns to the six principles that were applied then the *ISIS*

Report Card answer is quite obvious and that is that they cannot make that claim as being the true ‘soldiers of God’ because they acted and still act contrary to the basic principles of Islam.

Whilst their claims have been widely publicized and even though ISIS sees itself succeeding in setting up an Islamic State, it is highly unlikely that its leadership will be able to maintain the managing of the Caliphate because of the manner in which it went about establishing it; any act based on violence begets violence. Be that as it may, for this documentary Masood should have got on board besides Abu Rumaysah other ISIS supporters to have gained a broader understanding of ISIS’ ideology and workings in and beyond the UK. Abu Rumaysah, though articulate, did not have much to reveal as regards ISIS’ thinking and activities in the Iraqi-Syria region. Abu Rumaysah was himself grappling with information and he seemed to have been basically ill-informed about what was really taking place on the ground in the mentioned region; and he, as expected, indicated that he would have to verify some of the accusations that Masood had referred to in the interview and he, of course, rejected all the media reports as ways of trying to vilify ISIS’ true position in that region.

One of Masood’s key interviewees was Aymenn al-Tammi; the latter is based at the Oxford University where studies the emergence and development of extremist and sectarian Muslim groups. In al-Tammi’s interview, he underlined the fact that groups such as ISIS thrive in environments that are fragile and unstable. Now it is a well-known fact that in the aftermath of the Iraqi invasion by the USA and the ‘coalition of the willing’ that a tattered and torn Iraq was left behind and it is for this reason that Kramer & Michalowski’s significant study should be taken seriously and separately pursued by the world community (also see Hinnebusch 2007). That aside, the documentary interviewed Yousif Khoei who diplomatically argued that there were those – without mentioning names – groups that possess and use petrodollars to fuel sectarianism and tainting Islam. He hastened to add that during the earlier period the sectarian camps were small and marginal but they have since

gained support from those states that wish to extend their spheres of influence politically. He lamented the fact that the West contributed to these extremist groups since the days when they started out in Afghanistan. As far as he was concerned, UK Muslim organizations should adopt a self-critical approach to deal with these extremist developments. Khoei expressed the opinion that ISIS' ideology remains a menace to all and that something that affects everyone; since this is the case, it should be jointly dealt with and that the sole purpose of working together is to eventually achieve 'justice'.

In conclusion, whilst the documentary succeeded - though unevenly - to share some insights into ISIS. It did provide an understanding through the interviews why sectarianism and extremism are elements that should be avoided and rejected. Even though this documentary might not have offered a clear understanding of what ISIS was and is all about, it helped to open up the debate regarding groups such as ISIS and the reasons for the spread of sectarianism and extremism. One is however intrigued by the fact that Masood winded up his documentary by talking about 'Islamic terrorism'; instead of dropping the word 'Islamic' from the phrase he employed the phrase as is without thinking about its implications in the public arena; this is a point that was stressed by Khoi who clearly stated that one should not couple these two words as has been the case in the media; as far as he is concerned there is no such phrase. One moreover agrees with Masood that the Salafism and Wahhabism along with the radicalization of Muslim youth pose major challenges to Sunni Muslims as such; according to Masood, radical interpretations of the sources of Islam can be a major threat and this need to be urgently addressed by the Muslim societies at all levels. For Masood, Wahhabism has furthermore been the main cause for the mayhem and violence and everyone, therefore, should get to understand how it operates and counter it wherever it rears its head.

Setting aside some of the critical remarks that were made *en passant* throughout this essay, one cannot but agree that the documentary stimulated an interesting debate regarding the twin issues of extremism and sectarianism, ISIS' status as a representative Muslim movement, the psychological effect of Muslim-Muslim violence in and beyond the Middle

East and the impact these developments are having on non-Muslim communities around the globe. There is little doubt that this documentary raised more questions than answers. What this all means is that the Muslim societies particularly their leadership should play a greater role in addressing these issues publicly with the hope of finding some solution to the problems affecting the Muslim societies in and beyond the Muslim heartlands.

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