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‘Jihad’ in Syria: Fallacies of ISIS’ End-Time Prophecies

By Mohamed Bin Ali

Synopsis

The conflict in Syria has attracted many foreign fighters from across the globe. They have gone to Syria with the belief that it is a Jihad obligation. Many are also drawn to Syria through a strong belief that it is a prelude to the fulfilment of a prophecy of the End of Time (Yaumul Qiyamah).

Commentary

THE ONGOING conflict in Syria which started as part of the Arab Spring against the Syrian President Bashar Al-Assad has since turned into a war that has drawn in many regional powers and international players. At the same time, Muslims from many parts of the world have travelled to the country to join the rebel forces.

For over three years since the conflict started in 2011, both the Assad regime and its opponents have committed war crimes that include mass-killings, kidnappings, indiscriminate bombings, executions and murders.

Three-level conflict

Broadly, the ongoing conflict in Syria runs on three levels. The first is a sectarian one between Sunnis and the Shi’ite regime which is also a struggle between Sunni Islam and Shi’ite Islam led by Iran. The second level is the ideologically-motivated attack against the Assad regime.

The rebels are those who join Al-Qaeda affiliated groups on the premise that the Syrian war is part of the global jihad; and others who are driven by end-times prophetic narrative. These individuals believe that they have to be in Syria to be part of the final battle.

The third is the humanitarian level i.e. the conflict is portrayed as a humanitarian crisis as some travel to Syria to render humanitarian and financial aid. Many are radicalised by what they see and who they come into contact with in Syria.

Syria is undergoing a political conflict that serves as the newest hotspot attracting scores of foreign fighters. Its ability to mobilise and draw foreign fighters is unprecedented; surpassing that of even the Soviet-Afghan war. These fighters who claimed to perform the act of jihad against the perceived

infidel Assad regime are factionalised opposition groups comprising the secular nationalist Free Syrian Army (FSA), rebel groups like Al-Qaeda affiliated Jabhat al-Nusra (JAN or Al-Nusra Front) and Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham (ISIS or ISIL).

Political not religious conflict

However, many believe that the ongoing conflict in Syria is not about religion and the war which is taking place is not an act of jihad. Muslim scholars have come forward to clarify that the political conflict in Syria does not qualify as "jihad".

For example, Tunisia's Mufti, Sheikh Othman Battikh, has described calls for jihad against the government in Syria as a "huge mistake" that is not permitted under Islam. Sheikh Battikh stressed that those who went to fight in Syria under the banner of jihad were "fooled and have been brainwashed."

Apart from Muslim scholars, some Islamist groups have also agreed that the Syrian conflict cannot be categorised as a religious war and called for peace and reconciliation. Mohammed Sawan, leader of the Muslim Brotherhood in Libya, said the battle in the Arab region (including Syria) is not about Islam or identity at all. It is about fundamental values of democracy, freedom and rights. It has nothing to do with a clash between Islamists and non-Islamists.

The End-Time narratives

Many fighters who travelled to Syria are swayed by the narrative of performing armed Jihad in Syria. These individuals and many others were influenced by the "doomsday narrative"; that the conflict in Syria is a prelude to the anticipated *Yaumul Qiyamah* (end of time).

They argue that the Syrian conflict is the start of the end-times. According to them, it is the apocalyptic struggle between the forces of good represented by the Mahdi (the prophesied redeemer of Islam who will rule before the Day of Judgment and rid the world of evil) and evil as represented, for example, by the Syrian Assad regime. Hence, they argue that it is the religious duty of Muslims, and if they can do so, to go and join the fight to defeat the Assad regime and help usher in the final victory for Islam.

Such narratives are based on sayings of the Prophet (*Hadith*) which are often misunderstood and taken out of context. Among the narratives used is, for example, a hadith on carriers of the Black Banners (the black banners are used by the current violent Islamist groups as their official flag) narrated on authority of Ibn Majah, a medieval scholar of hadith: "If you see the Black Banners coming from Khurasan go to them immediately, even if you must crawl over ice, because indeed amongst them is the Caliph, Al Mahdi...and no one can stop that army until it reaches Jerusalem."

Some scholars are also sceptical of the accuracy of the interpretation of the prophecy in the Hadith though few would express such reservations in public for fear of being misinterpreted as doubters of the prophecies.

The role of ideology and Internet

Ideology plays an important role in many conflicts such as in Syria as it appears in a religious guise. These ideas are actively propagated through the Internet and social media by radical preachers who used some of the hadiths of the end-time prophecies. One example of such preachers is the Philippines-based Musa Cerantonio who was arrested in the Philippines. Musa, 29, who was born in Melbourne to an Italian family, converted to Islam at the age of 17 and is now one of the most popular online preachers supporting ISIS. He allegedly used the Internet to publicly urge Muslims to join "jihad" in Iraq and Syria. In a youtube video, Musa described the various Islamist groups such as ISIS, JAN and others including Al-Qaeda and Taliban as warriors of Islam who carry the black banners as described in the prophetic tradition.

Such claims from radical preachers on the end time prophecies should be treated with great care and

wisdom. The Prophetic Traditions, just like the Holy Quran, should be studied in a more rigorous, systematic and scholarly manner. Unlike most any ordinary books, it cannot simply be taken literally and without a full understanding of its context. For the Prophetic Traditions, there is also a question of verifying its authenticity as this usually involves a chain of transmitters as compared to the Quran, which was sent directly from God through the Archangel Gibril to Prophet Muhammad.

The audience of such messages should also have the ability to discern certain truths from untruths. For example, the endorsement of Islamist groups like ISIS as warriors of Khurasan (in Central Asia) as claimed by preachers such as Musa Cerantonio is highly questionable and refutable. This is due to the indiscriminately violent nature of ISIS, which contradicts the expected coming of Imam al-Mahdi, which is to bring peace and stability as narrated in another Prophetic Tradition.

Muslims must be able to distinguish political issues from religious ones and be fully aware of politics cleverly couched in religious language. This ability to make a clear distinction will enable them to think with a clear and logical mind, instead of allowing themselves to be emotionally manipulated by religious rhetoric.

On the part of the scholars there is a pressing need to counter such narratives with a rigorous in-depth study of the Prophetic Traditions which have been quoted widely on the Internet. This is to prevent the genuine messages of Islam from being manipulated or misunderstood.

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