

The inhumane humans of ISIS

By [Benjamin J. Dueholm](#)

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With [an authorization looming in Congress](#) for our ongoing war against the so-called Islamic State, a muddled conversation has sprung up about the group's relationship to mainstream Islam, its relationship to American and European policy in the region, and the military and political measures needed to counter it. Graeme Wood interviewed scholars and activists to shed light on what ISIS is trying to accomplish and why. [His resulting story](#)—a long tour through the theology, history, and practice of this particularly brutal offshoot of Salafist Islam—is alarming, not least to Wood himself:

The Salafis I met in London are unstumpable: no question I posed left them stuttering. They lectured me garrulously and, if one accepts their premises, convincingly. To call them un-Islamic appears, to me, to invite them into an argument that they would win.... These men spoke with an academic precision that put me in mind of a good graduate seminar. I even enjoyed their company, and that frightened me as much as anything else.

In part the story has fed into a no-true-Scotsman argument about whether ISIS should, in fact, be called “un-Islamic.” The more important challenge ISIS poses, in Wood's depiction, is to the implicitly secular understanding so many of us have of the motive forces behind violence of the sort that ISIS practices. We tend to think that “religious” movements, at least in the developing world, are a proxy for economic deprivation, social marginalization, and/or nationalism. Ameliorate the underlying cause, and the pathology will go away.

But poverty is not causing people to flock from the UK to a war-torn, drought-stricken Syria, and to burn their passports when they arrive. The oppression of Muslim communities in Europe is a moral crime and a strategic liability, but it pales next to the daily round of executions of “apostate” Muslims in ISIS-held territory. And while the U.S.-led war in Iraq helped create ISIS, the group's support is not

strictly a reaction to Western meddling; indeed, far from borrowing the techniques of a national liberation movement, ISIS seems determined to provoke *greater* American involvement in the region.

What if the religious motives expressed by ISIS ideologues are sincere, and not amenable to Western political and cultural reforms? What if we were forced to assume of masked murderers what we assume of ourselves—that their worldviews, like our own, motivate their actions in a reasonably straightforward way? Given that not a few ISIS members and sympathizers are converts raised in secular cultures, it's an assumption that seems hard to avoid.

There is surely more to this than the harsh beauty of a coherent scholarly argument. There is more to it than the alleged vacuity of modern life, into which awesomely cruel ideologies can rush. There is more to it than the reality of a realm of distinctly “religious” thought and experience. Yet all of these things are real. And they are too easily ignored by thoughtful people formed in the conviction that reality is secular—which is, in a way, to insist that reality is *our* version of the thing, to which all the world is somehow drifting.

While that drift is on pause in the Middle East, perhaps we should re-examine the limiting views of human motivation that are so close at hand when people do inexplicably horrible things. It would be a brutal but fitting irony if the shocking crimes of ISIS forced us to acknowledge the fullness and depth of their humanity.