The Failure of Prophecy and the Future of IS

As many commentators have argued, much of the extraordinary success of IS in recruiting foreign fighters stemmed from their more explicitly apocalyptic vision of the struggle against the enemies of Islam. Swift military success was followed by the restoration of the Caliphate and pronouncements of the imminent and final global triumph of Islam. The military defeat of IS is surely a refutation of that prophecy and will seriously demoralise its supporters. Decades of social scientific studies of similar failures of prophecy says otherwise. This Policy Brief summarises the key findings of such research and their implications for estimating the resilience of IS.

About the Author

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Dr. Lorne L. Dawson is a Professor in the Department of Sociology and Legal Studies at the University of Waterloo. He has written three books, edited four books, and published sixty five academic articles and book chapters. Most of his research was in the sociology of religion, but work on why some new religions become violent led to research on the process of radicalisation leading to terrorism. He is the Project Director of the Canadian Network for Research on Terrorism, Security and Society (www.tsas.ca), and is currently engaged in qualitative research on foreign fighters in Syria and Iraq (e.g., Dawson, Lorne L., and Amarasingam, A. "Talking to Foreign Fighters: Insights into the Motivations for Hijrah to Syria and Iraq," Studies in Conflict and Terrorism 40, no. 3 (2017). http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/1057610X.2016.1274216). He is currently preparing a book (with Dr. Amarasingam) on foreign jihadi fighters for Hurst/Oxford University Press. He makes numerous invited presentations to academic and government groups, and is frequently interviewed in the media in Canada about terrorism.

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Why has the so-called Islamic State (IS) engaged in the mass execution of 'infidel' and 'apostate' prisoners, sectarian genocide, the sexual slavery of women, and the rampant use of martyrdom operations as an instrument of war? One part of the answer is that they think these and other extreme measures are justified by the return of the Caliphate and the imminent end of the world as we know it. Living in the divinely ordained End of Days is deeply relativising, sweeping away regard for the norms and laws of humanity. The apocalyptic undertone of jihadi terrorism has long been recognised, and everyone began to realise the explicitly apocalyptic motivations of IS when Graeme Wood published "What ISIS Really Wants." In *The ISIS Apocalypse*, Will McCants carefully documented the nature and history of the group's apocalyptic understanding of its struggle.[1]

The prodigious propaganda of IS is suffused with references to the impending culmination of history, and the pivotal role of IS in ushering in the prophesised new world order. Most typically, IS's flagship English language zine, *Dabiq*, is named after the small town in northern Syria where an ancient tradition predicts the great final battle will happen between the forces of good and evil. Much of the legitimacy and lure of the call for foreign fighters also hinges on the prophetic amalgam of re-establishing the Caliphate and participating in the triumph of the new sacred world order.[2] It is commonly assumed that these apocalyptic beliefs factor into the fanaticism and fury with which IS fighters engage their enemies. Elsewhere I have delineated some of the behavioural and strategic consequences of holding apocalyptic beliefs for countering jihadi terrorism, and as I stated then: "[W]e need to imaginatively step beyond our contemporary secular prejudices and recognise the consequences of living a life fundamentally rooted in a faith in providence, in the active role of the supernatural in this world."[3] But what happens when the jihadist prophecy fails, when the Caliphate of IS is militarily defeated and The End has yet to come?

To my knowledge, McCants is one of the few scholars of IS to link these concerns in a brief posting to *Jiihadica* entitled "Apocalypse Delayed," written when the town of Dabiq was captured by Turkish-backed rebels in October 2016.[4] In this posting he notes that Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, the progenitor of IS, had long predicted "that the fire he had ignited in Iraq would blaze a trail to the apocalyptic showdown in Dabiq."[5] He also discusses how IS had celebrated the prophetic significance of taking Dabiq in 2014. Yet when the town slipped out of IS's grasp there were no discernible consequences for the credibility of IS amongst its supporters around the world. How should we account for this situation? Does it call into question the vaunted apocalyticism of this group – one of its most distinctive features?

[1] William McCants, *The ISIS Apocalypse: The History, Strategy, and Doomsday Vision of The Islamic State* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2015).
[2] Lorne L. Dawson and Amarnath Amarasingam, "Talking to Foreign Fighters: Insights into the Motivations for Hijra to Syria and Iraq," *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism* 40, no. 3 (2016): 191-210, doi: 10.1080/1057610X.2016.1274216.
[3] Lorne L. Dawson, "The Study of New Religious Movements and the Radicalization of Home-grown Terrorists: Opening a Dialogue," *Terrorism and Political Violence* 21, no. 1 (2010): 14. doi: 10.1080/09546550903409163.
[4] William McCants, "Apocalypse Delayed," *Jihadica*, October 16, 2016, http://www.jihadica.com/apocalypse-delayed/.
[5] McCants, *Apocalypse Delayed*.

As Dabiq was falling to the enemy McCants observes:

> [...] ISIS' followers began to frantically explain why the approaching showdown in Dabiq would not be THE showdown. Well, the expected Mahdi, a messiah figure, had not yet appeared to lead the battle. Or the required eighty nation coalition had not rolled into town. In the past few days, ISIS' own newsletter tried to downplay the significance of the town's coming fall. The "great battle" will come to pass because God has promised it would; but this isn't that battle because all the other preceding prophecies haven't come to pass.[6]

Perhaps, as McCants goes on to suggest, we should cynically conclude that the leaders of IS had just exploited this prophetic tradition to whip up enthusiasm for the cause – certainly this is the view I suspect most secular political commentators from the West are inclined to adopt. Alternatively, as McCants says, we could more generously propose "[...] that ISIS, like other apocalyptic groups, changes its understanding of prophecy's fulfillment based on circumstance."[7] The implications of either option warrant closer inspection, especially if the intention is to draw inferences about how IS will react when the Caliphate is defeated, or the Caliph, Abū Bakr al-Baghdadi, is killed. McCants concludes, quite rightly, "[W]e won't know for sure which interpretation is right until we hear high-level defectors or discover internal documents bearing on the matter."[8] There is more we can do, however, than merely wait for additional data. We can turn to the existing literature on the failure of prophecy for guidance.

Common sense suggests that the failure of such a prophecy should have a crippling effect, dramatically undermining the morale and appeal of IS. That, however, is not what the research literature in the study of prophetic new religious movements indicates will happen – at least not immediately and without qualification. Every year many new religious groups make startling prophecies of imminent doom or the radical transformation of the world. In fact, such prophecies are one of the hallmarks of new religious movements.[9] Occasionally one of these prophecies attracts a wider audience. In 2011, for instance, the popular radio evangelist Harold Camping predicted Jesus would return on 21 May 2011, and the ultimate destruction of the world would follow on 21 October. The media of the world beat a path to Camping's door.[10] Contrary to expectation, however, the clear refutation of a religious prophecy rarely results in the demise of a religion, and even Camping's movement would likely have survived if he had not died. In fact it might be said that Christianity itself was born from the ashes of the burning expectation of the earliest Christians that Jesus would return in their lifetimes. The vast majority of new religious movements survive the failure of their prophecies and researchers have developed a fairly clear, if still preliminary, grasp of how and why this happens. It is time to apply some of the insights from this literature to the impending demise of IS in Iraq and Syria.

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[6] Ibid.

[7] Ibid.

[8] Ibid.

[9] Lorne L. Dawson, "Prophetic Failure and Millennial Movements," in *Oxford Handbook of Millennialism*, ed. Catherine Wessinger (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 150-170.

[10] Michael Barkun, "Messages from Beyond: Prophecy in the Contemporary World," in *Prophecy in the Millennium: When Prophecies Persist*, ed. Sarah Harvey and Suzanne Newcombe (Surrey: Ashgate, 2013), 17-26; Charles Sarno, Shestakofsky Benjamin, Helen Shoemaker and Rebecca Aponte, "Rationalizing Judgement Day: A Content Analysis of Harold Camping's Open Forum Program," *Sociology of Religion* 76, no. 2 (2015): 199-221, doi: 10.1093/socrel/srv012.

The comparative study of dozens of cases shows that most groups making such prophecies survive their failure quite well, at least in the immediate aftermath of the experience. This counter-intuitive finding helped to lay the foundation of the theory of cognitive dissonance in psychology.[11] When our expectations and reality clash it causes distress that we will seek to resolve by bringing what we know and what we believe into greater harmony. Normally this means we change our expectations or beliefs. But when a serious commitment is involved people often seek instead to reinterpret their experiences so they conform better to their expectations. They attempt to see reality differently. Such is acutely the case when it comes to deeply held religious commitments.[12]

Several decades of research demonstrates that there is more to the story as well.[13] The answer to the conundrum of surviving failed prophecies hinges on many additional social factors. Smaller religious groups often display remarkable resiliency. Their belief systems equip them with an array of plausible ways to rationalise the failure of a prophecy. A prophetic failure can be interpreted as a 'test of faith', or the result of some kind of 'human error', or 'blamed on others' in various ways, or the seeming failure can be denied altogether by 'spiritualising' the event, claiming at least a partial success in some parallel spiritual domain.[14] Overall, there are strong incentives, given the investments made, to reinterpret the seeming failure of prophecy as part of a larger plan, of a march towards eventual triumph over the forces of evil. The very act of forging and accepting such rationalisations becomes a constituent part of the religious practice that reinforces the faith of believers. This is a process of 'dissonance management', which all religions engage in to some degree.[15] It is a constituent part of the process of recruiting new members and sustaining existing ones, which both the groups themselves and their individual members learn, and which develops with changes in circumstance and the passage of time – as McCants intimates might prove to be the case with IS and its prophecies as well.

Research has further shown that the success of the rationalisations used to manage dissonance depends on at least four larger social processes. The first is the degree to which believers are socialised to the prophetic process and expectations. The second is the degree to which members are motivated or compelled to engage in costly preparations for the prophesised event. The third is the degree to which leaders respond swiftly and thoroughly to apparent failures. The fourth is the degree of solidarity and social support present in the group. All of these factors will vary from group to group and from time to time, and their combination will determine how well any group survives a failure of prophecy. The presence of each social process, and the

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[11] Leon Festinger, Henry Reicken and Stanley Schacter, *When Prophecy Fails* (New York: Harper and Row, 1956).

[12] Joel Cooper, *Cognitive Dissonance: Fifty Years of a Classic Theory* (Los Angles: Sage, 2007).

[13] Lorne L. Dawson, "When Prophecy Fails and Faith Persists: A Theoretical Overview," *Nova Religio: The Journal of Alternative and Emergent Religions* 3, no. 1 (1999): 60-82, doi: 10.1525/nr.1999.3.1.60; Jon R. Stone, *Expecting Armageddon: Essential Readings in Failed Prophecy* (New York: Routledge, 2000); Lorne L. Dawson et al., *How Prophecy Lives,* vol. 18, *Religion and the Social Order,* ed. Dianna G. Tumminia and William H. Swatos (Leiden, Holland: Brill, 2011).

[14] Joseph F. Zygmunt, "When Prophecies Fail: A Theoretical Perspective on the Comparative Evidence," *American Behavioral Scientist* 16, no. 2 (1972): 245-268, doi: 10.1177/000276427201600206; J. Gordon Melton, "Spiritualization and Reaffirmation: What Really Happens When Prophecy Fails," *American Studies* 26, no. 2 (1985): 17-29, http://www.jstor.org/stable/40641958; Dawson, *When Prophecy Fails and Persists: A Theoretical Overview.*

[15] Franklyn W. Dunford and Phillip R. Kunz, "The Neutralization of Religious Dissonance," *Review of Religious Research* 15, no. 1 (1973): 2-9, doi: 10.2307/3510291; Robert C. Prus, "Religious Recruitment and the Management of Dissonance: A Sociological Perspective," *Sociological Inquiry* 46, no. 2 (1976): 127-134, doi: 10.1111/j.1475-682X.1976.tb00757.x; Robert W. Balch et al., "Fifteen Years of Failed Prophecy: Coping with Cognitive Dissonance in a Baha's Sect," in *Millenium, Messiahs, and Mayhem,* ed. Thomas Robbins and Susan Palmer (New York: Routledge, 1997): 73-90; Dawson, *When Prophecy Fails and Persists: A Theoretical Overview.*

more complex interaction of variables, can be assessed with data obtained from observations, documents, and interviews.[16] If we turn our attention to IS it would seem that even a superficial assessment suggests that it would score high on each count. There is good reason to think, then, that the group, or at least its ideology, will survive the failure of its physical Caliphate.

Most groups, as stated, take prophetic failures in stride. The prophecies in question, we must recognise, are invariably less important to the day-to-day lives of believers than outsiders tend to think. This is particularly the case for social scientific researchers with their greater personal and professional commitment to logical consistency.[17] The social and spiritual rewards of being in the group surpass the costs of the specific failure, and the ridicule of outsiders often serves to reinforce the conviction they are part of the elect, the blessed few who see the truth and are destined for greater things – if only in the afterlife.

In the few known cases where a group disintegrated in the face of the failure of a prophecy, such as the Mission de l'Esprit Saint, the first incarnation of the Branch Davidians, and perhaps the Church Universal and Triumphant, the key factor has been the failure of the charismatic prophets to promptly provide a plausible rationalisation and to communicate it effectively to a dispersed membership.[18] If Abū Bakr al-Baghdadi, or a legitimate successor, can continue to successfully communicate with the rank and file of IS and its vast network of supporters around the world, supplying them with a plausible rationale for the unexpected twist of fate IS has experienced, then there is a strong likelihood that IS will survive the demise of the Caliphate in Iraq and Syria. The supply of rationalisations available in the rich heritage of the Qur'an, Hadith, and history of Islam dwarfs the possibilities available to most other new religious movements, and we must remember that rationalisations proffered need not be plausible to either us or the *ulama* of moderate Islam. Given the exegetical resourcefulness of the movement's ideologues, and the group's revolutionary exploitation of the internet and other new social media, its survival in some form seems assured.[19] As Fawaz Gerges concludes, the "long term prognosis is that the 'caliphate' model set up by Baghdadi, Adnani, and their associates, which has survived for a few years, will provide motivation and inspiration for the next jihadist wave. Long after Baghdadi disappears from the scene, his 'caliphate' legacy will continue to haunt the imagination of fellow jihadists."[20] Even a little knowledge of the independent research on apocalyptic groups and the failure of prophecies bolsters this conclusion.

[16] Lorne L. Dawson and Simon Dein, "The Scandal of the Lubavitch Rebbe: Messianism as Response to Failed Prophecy," *Journal of Contemporary Religion* 23, no. 2 (2008): 163-180, doi: 10.1080/13537900802024550; Dawson, *Prophetic Failure and Millennial Movements*; Lorne L. Dawson and Bradley C. Whitsel, "Leadership and the Impact of Failed Prophecy on New Religious Movements: The Case of the Church Universal Triumphant," in *How Prophecy Lives*, vol. 18, *Religion and Social Order*, ed. Dianna G. Tumminia and William H. Swatos (Leiden, Holland: Brill, 2011): 115-151.

[17] David Snow and Richard Machlek, "On the Presumed Fragility of Unconventional Beliefs," *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 21, no. 1 (1982): 15-26, doi: 10.2307/1385566.

[18] Susan J. Palmer and Natalie Finn, "Coping with Apocalypse in Canada: Experiences of Endtime in La Mission de l'Esprit Saint and the Institute of Applied Metaphysics," *Sociological Analysis* 53, no. 4 (1992): 397-415, doi: 10.2307/3711435; Dawson and Whitsel, *Leadership and the Impact of Failed Prophecy on New Religious Movements: The Case of the Church Universal and Triumphant*.

[19] Jytte Klaussen, "Tweeting the Jihad: Social Media Networks of Western Foreign Fighters in Syria and Iraq," *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism* 38, no. 1 (2015): 1-22, doi: 10.1080/1057610X.2014.974948; Charlie Winter, "Documenting the Virtual 'Caliphate'," Quilliam Foundation, 2015, https://www.quilliaminternational.com/shop/e-publications/documenting-the-virtual-caliphate/.

[20] Fawaz A. Gerges, *ISIS: A History* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2016), xi.

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