

CHAPTER TEN

THE COMING FINAL BATTLE?

Many Muslims anticipate that the end of days is here, or will be here soon. In a 2012 Pew poll, in most of the countries surveyed in the Middle East, North Africa, and South Asia, half or more Muslims believe that they will personally witness the appearance of the Mahdi. In Islamic eschatology, the messianic figure known as the Mahdi (the Guided One) will appear before the Day of Judgment. This expectation is most common in Afghanistan (83 percent), followed by Iraq (72), Tunisia (67), and Malaysia (62).¹

Historically, narratives of the apocalypse have occupied a relatively marginal role in Sunni Islam, as distinct from Shi'ism. For Sunnis, the Mahdi is not yet here. For most Shi'ites, the Mahdi has already been born, but is now hidden, and when he reveals himself, justice will prevail.² The 1979 Iranian Revolution is considered by some Shi'ites to be an early sign of the Mahdi's appearance. For both Sunnis and Shi'ites, the Mahdi's role is, in part, to end the disunity of the Muslim community and to prepare for the second coming of Jesus Christ, who is understood to be a prophet in Islam.

Jean-Pierre Filiu, an expert on Islamic eschatology, observes that popular pamphlets and tracts “colored with superstition” have always circulated, but “until recently [their] impact on political and theological thinking was practically nil” among Sunnis.³ A conscious effort to connect these narratives to current events can be traced, however, to at least the early 1980s, when Abdullah Azzam, an architect of modern jihad, argued that Muslims should join the jihad in Afghanistan, which he considered to be a sign that the end times were imminent.⁴

For years, al Qaeda invoked apocalyptic predictions in both its internal and external messaging, by using the name Khorasan, a region that includes part of Iran, Central Asia, and Afghanistan, and from which, it is prophesied, the Mahdi will emerge alongside an army bearing black flags. Internal al Qaeda documents and communiqués from Osama bin Laden often listed his location as Khorasan, and more recently, an al Qaeda cell in Syria adopted the name.⁵ These claims were, however, mostly symbolic.

ISIS has begun to evoke the apocalyptic tradition much more explicitly, through actions as well as words. Thus ISIS has captured Dabiq, a town understood in some versions of the narrative to be a possible location for the final apocalyptic battle, and declared its intent to conquer Constantinople (modern-day Istanbul), in keeping with prophecy.⁶

For ISIS, and AQI before it, an important feature of the narrative is the expectation of sectarian war. Will McCants, a historian of early Islam, explains: “The early Islamic apocalyptic prophecies are intrinsically sectarian because they arose from similar sectarian conflicts in early Islam waged in Iraq and the Levant. As such, they resonate powerfully in today’s sectarian civil wars.”⁷

Hassan Abbas, an expert on jihadi movements, observes, “ISIS is trying deliberately to instigate a war between Sunnis and Shi’a, in the belief that a sectarian war would be a sign that the final times

have arrived. In the eschatological literature, there is reference to crisis in Syria and massacre of Kurds—this is why Kobane is important. ISIS is exploiting these apocalyptic expectations to the fullest,” he said. It is also why it was so important for ISIS to establish a caliphate, he explains. That too is a sign in their worldview.⁸

WHILE MUSLIM APOCALYPTIC thought is diverse and complex, most narratives contain some elements that would be easily recognized by Christians and Jews: at an undetermined time in the future the world will end, a messianic figure will return to the earth, and God will pass judgment on all people, justly relegating some to heaven and some to hell.

Considerable diversity exists, however, in writings about what will *precede* this final judgment. David Cook is a leading authority on Muslim eschatology. Because the Qur’an “is not an apocalyptic book,” he explains, writers have been forced to turn to supplementary materials—including the words attributed to Muhammad, the Bible, global conspiracy theories about Judaism, stories of UFO abductions, and theories about the Bermuda Triangle—when discussing “the confused period” that comes before these final events.⁹

Cook explains that the events in this period are typically described as Lesser Signs of the Hour and Greater Signs of the Hour. The Lesser Signs are “moral, cultural, political, religious, and natural events designed to warn humanity that the end is near and to bring people into a state of repentance.”¹⁰ These signs tend to be so general that it is possible to find indicators of them in any modern society (for example, crime, natural disaster, etc.).

The Greater Signs, by contrast, offer a more detailed account of the final days, and while there is considerable variation among these stories, a few elements are consistent: Constantinople will be conquered by Muslims; the Antichrist will appear and travel to Je-

rusalem; a messianic figure (in some instances Jesus, and in some instances the Mahdi) will come to earth, kill the Antichrist, and convert the masses to Islam. The world's non-Muslim territories will be conquered.¹¹

Many contemporary writers concerned with the apocalypse resent the suggestion that they are somehow affiliated with or participating in terrorist violence, Cook observes. But it would be naïve to deny the increasing role that this literature has played in contemporary jihad. Since September 11, he says, these writers have come to focus increasingly on Iraq—thus relegating Afghanistan and Israel to positions of lesser importance—and have implied that the American invasion was a sign of the coming apocalypse.¹²

This isn't to suggest that Israel has become insignificant in these narratives; much of this writing is virulently anti-Semitic and assumes a worldwide Jewish conspiracy against Muslims. In the new formulation, however, America is understood to be "the more or less willing instrument of Israel."¹³

ISIS is using apocalyptic expectation as a key part of its appeal. "If you think all these mujahideen came from across the world to fight Assad, you're mistaken. They are all here as promised by the Prophet. This is the war he promised—it is the Grand Battle," a Sunni Muslim told Reuters.

Another purported sign is the movement into Syria of the pro-Assad Hezbollah militia, whose flag is yellow. "As Imam Sadeq has stated, when the (forces) with yellow flags fight anti-Shi'ites in Damascus and Iranian forces join them, this is a prelude and a sign of the coming of his holiness," Rohollah Hosseinian, an Iranian cleric and member of Parliament, explained.¹⁴

The *New York Times* interviewed dozens of Tunisian youth, who are disproportionately represented among foreign fighters with ISIS, and found that messianic expectation was part of the appeal. "There are lots of signs that the end will be soon, according to the

Quran,” a twenty-four year-old said.¹⁵ Almost none of the interviewees believed that ISIS was involved in mass killings or beheadings. “All of this is manufactured in the West,” a twenty-eight-year-old taxi driver said.¹⁶ All of the youth viewed the existing Arab governments as autocratic and corrupt. They complained that there were no pure scholars of Islam whose views were untainted by politics or allegiance to some form of earthly power; but at the same time noted that the absence of uncorrupted Islamic scholars could be yet another sign of the coming apocalypse. Another sign for these youth was ISIS’s declaration of the caliphate.¹⁷

ABU MUSAB AL SURI, one of the most important strategists of jihad, whom we have discussed throughout this book, incorporated apocalyptic narratives in his writings. His famous book, *A Call to a Global Islamic Resistance*, is not only the template for “individual jihad,” but contains many pages of apocalyptic predictions. Filiu observes that the book, advertised as “Your Path to Jihad,” was meant to attract a very wide readership of ordinary Muslims, not just committed Salafis.

“As against al-Qaida’s adventurism and centralized elitism, which in [al Suri’s] view renders it vulnerable at its very core, Abu Musab al-Suri proposes a distributed network model of decentralized resistance that reflects and responds to the aspirations of ordinary Muslims.”¹⁸ To that end, according to Filiu, al Suri included a discourse on the apocalypse, which, as he shows, has become increasingly popular, especially after 9/11 and the allied invasion of Iraq.¹⁹

“There is nothing in the least theoretical about this exercise in apocalyptic exegesis,” Filiu observes in regard to al Suri’s apocalyptic writings. “It is meant as a guide for action: ‘I have no doubt that we have entered into the age of tribulations. The reality of this mo-

ment enlightens us to the significance of such events. . . . We will be alive then, when Allah's order comes. And we shall obey what Allah has commanded.' ”²⁰

Zarqawi set about fulfilling al Suri's prophecies, even going so far as to publish communiqués detailing the fulfillment of specific predictions.²¹ He used apocalyptic imagery more than any other contemporary jihadist, Cook explains, much more so than bin Laden or Zawahiri.²² Baghdadi, the successor to Zarqawi, is taking the fulfillment of apocalyptic portents even more seriously than his predecessor.

In the summer of 2014, ISIS fought to capture Dabiq, a Syrian town close to the Turkish border and released the first issue of its English-language magazine, called *Dabiq*, in July 2014. Its editors explained that they anticipate that Dabiq will play a historical role in the period leading to the Final Day, but first it was necessary to purify the town and to raise the black flags of the caliphate there.²³ Now that allied forces have entered the battle, the jihadists anticipate that the final battle in Dabiq is drawing near, McCants explains, and both Shi'a and Sunni groups hope to achieve the privilege of destroying the infidels.²⁴

In ISIS's November 2014 video announcing the death of Abdul-Rahman (Peter) Kassig, a twenty-six-year-old former U.S. Army ranger, a British executioner claimed that Kassig had been killed at Dabiq. He also said, “Here we are burying the first American crusader in Dabiq, eagerly waiting for the remainder of your armies to arrive.”²⁵

Why is ISIS's obsession with the end of the world so important for us to understand? For one thing, violent apocalyptic groups tend to see themselves as participating in a cosmic war between good and evil, in which ordinary moral rules do not apply.²⁶ Most terrorist groups worry about offending their human audience with acts of violence that are too extreme. This was true even for bin Laden and al Qaeda Central, who withdrew their support for the Algerian

terrorist group GIA and admonished AQI for their violence against Muslims, as we have seen.

But violent apocalyptic groups are not inhibited by the possibility of offending their political constituents because they see themselves as participating in the ultimate battle. Apocalyptic groups are the most likely terrorist groups to engage in acts of barbarism, and to attempt to use rudimentary weapons of mass destruction. Their actions are also significantly harder to predict than the actions of politically motivated groups. The logic of ISIS is heavily influenced by its understanding of prophecy. The military strategic value of Dabiq has little to do with ISIS's desire for a confrontation there.

While most new religious movements that emphasize apocalyptic prophecy are not violent, the deliberate inculcation of apocalyptic fears often precedes violence. Two types of violence can occur: violence perpetrated by members against the membership, such as mass suicide; and violence against the outside world.

The American apocalyptic group Heaven's Gate is an example of a suicidal cult.²⁷ In 1997, 39 members committed mass suicide in an effort to join a group of aliens on their spacecraft, which cult members believed was following the tail of the Hale-Bopp comet. In 1993, more than 80 followers of David Koresh, the leader of the Branch Davidian cult, died in a fire they set themselves after a fifty-one-day standoff with federal agents.²⁸ Koresh had predicted, based on his reading of the book of Revelation, that his followers would achieve salvation as a result of violence at his compound.²⁹ The breakaway Catholic organization known as the Movement for the Restoration of the Ten Commandments of God anticipated the end of the world in the year 2000. Soon after adherents arrived at church on the anticipated end of the world, the church burned down. Ugandan authorities suspected mass suicide, but when they found signs that some adherents had been poisoned or strangled, they concluded that the cause of death was murder.³⁰

It is not easy to determine which apocalyptic groups will turn

violent, or which violent groups will turn even more so. Michael Barkun, a leading scholar on violent apocalyptic groups, explains:

Predictions of violence on the basis of beliefs alone are notoriously unreliable. Inflammatory rhetoric can come from otherwise peaceable individuals. It does appear, however, that apocalypticists are more likely to engage in violence if they believe themselves to be trapped or under attack. Both conditions are as much a product of their own perception as of outside forces.”³¹

The group responsible for the 1979 Meccan Rebellion, a small sect led by Juhayman al 'Utaybi, is an example of a Muslim apocalyptic cult. Its leader, Juhayman, was a member of the Bedouin tribe that had participated in the Ikhwan Revolt in the 1920s, the aim of which was to return Saudi Arabia to its pure, Wahhabist roots. In November 1979, Juhayman's followers laid siege to the Grand Mosque compound in Mecca, a sacred site in Islam, which they held for two full weeks. Hundreds of people died during the siege. Most of the perpetrators were summarily executed or imprisoned, and the Saudi government kept the details regarding the perpetrators' motivations secret.

Some twenty-five years later, Thomas Hegghammer, a Norwegian scholar of Islam, was able to piece together what occurred. The cult was inspired by the teachings of al Albani, a quietist Salafi who advocated a return to the pure Islam of the Quran and the Hadith. In his view, most of the Saudi Salafis, who considered themselves to be followers of the “pious predecessors,” were actually influenced by later interpretations rather than the original texts. Al Albani eschewed politics and violence, and the cult began with the same quietist tendencies.

Two years before the siege, the leader of the cult had escaped into

the desert, having received a tip that the police were closing in on his group. While in the desert, he had a dream that his companion, Muhammad al Qahtani, was the Mahdi. Some of the members left the cult in response to the leader's messianic obsessions. But the rest of the group was determined to consecrate Qahtani as the Mahdi in Mecca, in the belief that this would precipitate the end of the world and the series of related events described in Muslim apocalyptic writings. Three hundred rebels attacked the Grand Mosque, taking thousands of worshippers hostage. Most of the civilians trapped inside were allowed to leave, but an unknown number were retained as hostages.³² Then they awaited the arrival of the hostile army from the north, as promised by the eschatological tradition. The timing of the attack was propitious—the end of the *hijri* century, “the last pilgrimage of the 14th century according to the Islamic calendar.”³³ ISIS reportedly circulates Juhayman's dissident writings.³⁴

But the Meccan Rebellion is instructive in another way, which seems to have gone unnoticed by scholars. On the third day of the siege, al Qahtani, the supposed Mahdi, was killed. Juhayman solved this problem by ordering his followers not to acknowledge the death of the purported Mahdi. Years afterward, Hegghammer explains, some followers continued to believe that the Mahdi was still alive.³⁵ In other words, despite the failure of their leader's prophecy, at least some of Juhayman's followers refused to believe the truth of what had happened to the supposed Mahdi, and vowed to continue with their fight. This may prove instructive as it's conceivable that we could see ISIS follow this model if and when their own prophecies fail.

In a study that is widely seen as among the most important contributions to social psychology, a team of observers joined a prophetic, apocalyptic cult to determine what would happen to the group if the predicted events failed to materialize. Marian Keech (a pseudonym for Dorothy Martin), the leader of the cult, predicted the

destruction of much of the United States in a great flood, scheduled for December 21, 1955. She told her followers that they would be rescued from the floodwaters by a team of outer-space men in flying saucers with whom she was able to communicate, she said, through telepathy. When the apocalyptic flood did not materialize, instead of walking away from the cult and its leader, most members continued as loyal followers, and commenced efforts to recruit new followers.

Out of this observation, the researchers, Leon Festinger, Henry Riecken, and Stanley Schachter, developed the theory of cognitive dissonance, which states that when individuals are confronted with empirical evidence that would seem to prove their beliefs wrong, instead of rejecting their beliefs, they will often hew to them more strongly still, rationalizing away the disconfirming evidence. All of us have experiences with cognitive dissonance in our ordinary lives: When we hear or see something we don't want to believe because it threatens our view of ourselves or our world, rather than changing our views, we may be tempted to persuade ourselves that there has been a mistake—the disconfirming evidence is wrong, we need new glasses, we misheard. When this happens in cults, members may try to recruit others to join them in their views.³⁶ Since then, a number of similar cults have been studied, many but not all of which followed this pattern. The vast majority survived the failed prophecy, but some employed other stratagems to cope with cognitive dissonance, such as “spiritualizing” the prophecy by claiming that life did not end, but changed significantly, on the day the world as we know it was predicted to end.^{37, 38}

AMONG PROTESTANT APOCALYPTIC cults, there is an important distinction between pre-tribulation and post-tribulation fundamentalists. Pre-tribulation believers expect that Jesus will save them from experiencing the apocalypse through a divine rapture, the simultaneous

ascension to heaven of all good Christians.³⁹ Post-tribulation believers expect to be present during the apocalypse. Christian militants who subscribe to post-tribulation beliefs consider it their duty to attack the forces of the Antichrist, who will become leader of the world during the end times.

William McCants explains that there is no analogous post-tribulation eschatology in Islam. “The Islamic Day of Judgment is preceded by a series of ‘signs,’ some of which occurred in Muhammad’s own life time. The signs are mentioned in words attributed to Muhammad and usually have the formula, ‘The Hour won’t come until . . .’ As you get closer to the Day, the signs become more intense. ISIS can’t hasten the Day with violence but it can claim to fulfill some of the major signs heralding its approach, which might be tantamount to the same thing.”⁴⁰

Many new religious movements employ a set of practices for enhancing commitment. These include sharing property and/or signing it over to the group upon admission; limiting interactions with the outside world; employing special terms for the outside world; ignoring outside news sources; speaking a special jargon; unusual sexual practices such as requiring free love, polygamy, or celibacy; communal ownership of property; uncompensated labor and communal work efforts; daily meetings; mortification procedures such as confession, mutual surveillance, and denunciation; institutionalization of awe for the group and its leaders through the attribution of magical powers; the legitimization of group demands through appeals to ultimate values (such as religion); and the use of special forms of address.⁴¹ Most terrorist groups employ at least some of these mechanisms. Violent cults develop a story about imminent danger to an “in-group,” foster group identity, dehumanize the group’s purported enemies, and encourage the creation of a “killer self” capable of murdering large numbers of innocent people. As we have seen, ISIS members engage in a number of these practices. Many Western

recruits burn their passports as a rite of passage. ISIS flaunts its sexual enslavement of “polytheists” as a sign of its strict conformance with Shariah, and of the coming end times. The strict dress code is enforced in part by public shaming of women who don’t comply.

Like other apocalyptic groups in history, ISIS’s stated goal is to purify the world and create a new era, in which a more perfect version of Islam is accepted worldwide. This is a typical millenarian project, which always involves transforming the world into something more pure, either politically (as with the communists’ “New Man”) or religiously. Dr. Robert J. Lifton is a psychiatrist who has studied “totalistic”⁴² groups since the 1950s, and he continues to write about them. “Increasingly widespread among ordinary people is the feeling of things going so wrong that only extreme measures can restore virtues and righteousness to society.”⁴³ None of us is entirely free of such inner struggles; there is much that is confusing about contemporary life, in which many people are no longer tethered to traditional societies. But apocalyptic groups act on these feelings, “destroying a world in order to save it,” in Lifton’s words.⁴⁴ Lifton was referring to another violent millenarian cult, Aum Shin-rikyo, which in the 1990s had attempted to acquire nuclear weapons and had succeeded in poisoning some five thousand people on the Tokyo subway, twelve of whom died.⁴⁵ But his words apply as well to ISIS. “Having studied some of the most destructive events of this era, I found much of what Aum did familiar, echoing the totalistic belief systems and end-of the-world aspirations I had encountered in other versions of the fundamentalist self. I came to see these, in turn, as uneasy reactions to the openness and potential confusions of the ‘protean’ self that history has bequeathed us.”⁴⁶ ISIS is similarly apocalyptic in its views, as similarly unpredictable.

As we have seen, ISIS emerged out of an especially barbaric strain of al Qaeda, which was initiated by Abu Musab al Zarqawi rather than Osama bin Laden. One of the reasons for both Zarqawi’s and ISIS’s anti-Shi’ite savagery is their apparent belief in end-times

prophecies. It is impossible to know whether Baghdadi and other ISIS leaders truly believe that the end times are near, or are using these prophecies instrumentally and cynically to attract a broader array of recruits. Either way, appealing to apocalyptic expectation is an important part of ISIS's modus operandi. And goading the West into a final battle in Syria is a critical component of the scenario.