

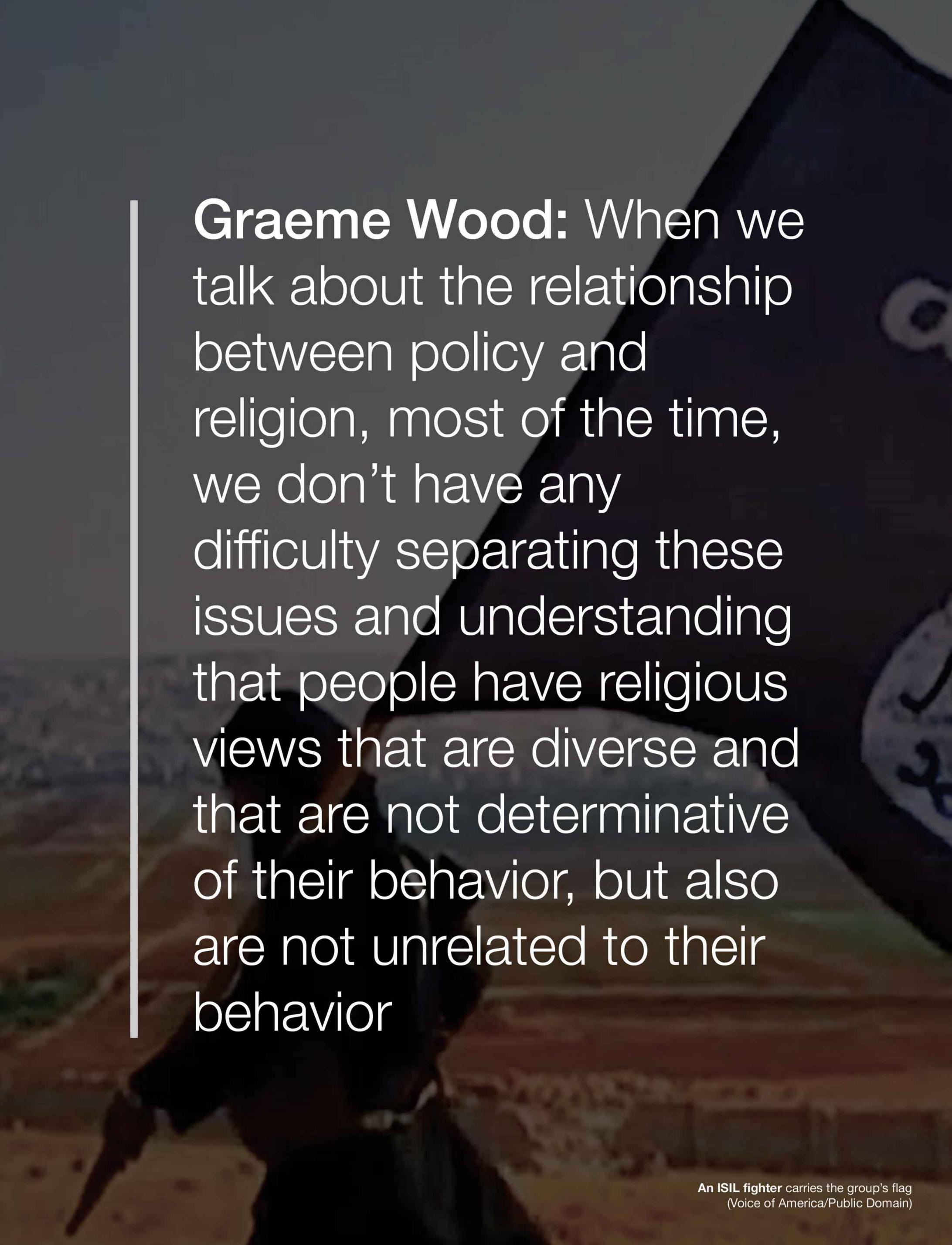
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ISIS and Reporting: A Conversation with Graeme Wood

Interviewed by Eli Stiefel

A person in a dark uniform is seen from behind, carrying a large flag. The flag is dark with a white emblem on the right side. The background is a blurred outdoor setting with a sandy ground.

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ISIS and Reporting

A Conversation with Graeme Wood

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Fletcher Security Review: Thank you very much for talking to me. It's a pleasure.

Graeme Wood: My pleasure.

FSR: Every year at *The Fletcher Security Review*, we have a different focus for our print edition. This year's topic explores the ever-broadening roles that militaries are playing and how the concept of security is understood by different audiences. The work you are doing is shaping public opinion and drastically impacting how audiences understand ISIS and the broader concepts of security. I read your recent book [*The Way of the Strangers: Encounters with the Islamic State*] and listened to your talk with Admiral Stavridis [James Stavridis, Dean of The Fletcher School] and was hoping to spring off of that discussion and your previous coverage to address some thoughts relating to this topic. Given that our topic is the concept of security and how it is understood by a broader audience, I would love to hear your thoughts about how the writing and reporting that you are doing impacts the understanding of security among the public, and policymakers.

GW: Let's back up a bit. As a journalist, one of my great freedoms is to be very much under-conceptualized. When I first started out writing on ISIS, the first observation that I made was that people were conceiving of the group in ways that were misleading, and I could therefore apply basic methods and questions, and perhaps have something new to say. That meant simply looking for raw data.

I don't think of "security" as a concept. My work interacts with larger questions of what security is, in that I might provide information, raw material, useful for people who are thinking in those broader terms. But largely what I try to do is describe what people are thinking.

FSR: You are quoted often, especially from your original article in *The Atlantic* ["What ISIS Really Wants," published in March 2015] as saying that ISIS is "very Is-

lamic." A lot of people pushed back pretty aggressively against that. One particular critique that I found interesting was from JM Berger at the Brookings Institute. In an article ["Enough about Islam: Why Religion Is Not the Most Useful Way to Understand ISIS"] he said, "to understand and counter ISIS, frame it properly. Identity-based extremism and millenarian apocalyptic cults provide a far more useful framework for understanding ISIS than Islam does." As you say, you are describing what people tell you about what they think in order to inform readers. JM Berger seems to have a different way of wanting to frame that information.

GW: First of all, it's not clear that the distinctions he is making are so clear. Millenarian cults are a subspecies of religion, and there is a subspecies of Islam that is focused on millenarian ideology. And Islam, in addition to being a religion, is an identity. None of these distinctions is hard and fast and exclusive of the others. When people say, as Berger does in that critique, that there are other ways to see the group and those other ways are useful, I don't disagree at all, and I recognize another plausible way of seeing the group. I draw on the literature of non-Islamic apocalyptic groups as much as I draw on those from within Islam.

What I was specifically reacting to, with that claim that they are "Islamic, very Islamic," was the flat-out denial that the traditions of Islam are something that we can look at to understand what they are doing. This is certainly false.

FSR: One of the things that people talked about a lot when discussing your article was that you were only discussing certain scholars and that you didn't pull on a broad enough list of sources or opinion. I saw your book almost as a response to these critics. You didn't write it specifically that way, of course, but you had all of these sources and footnotes from scholars who were saying more or less what you were saying and very clearly connected to the ideas and the ways that ISIS is speaking. In looking at this back-and-forth between you and critics, the pushback that I see you getting is maybe

politically correct or it seems to be trying to protect something that you are not necessarily attacking.

GW: I think that's exactly right. The attempt to say that ISIS gets Islam wrong is an attempt to protect something — namely a normative view of Islam — that I am not attacking. One of the strains of critique of my piece was to say “Wood doesn't go to mainstream Muslim scholars to ask their view on things.” The reason I didn't go to mainstream Muslims scholars is because mainstream Muslims scholars know nothing about ISIS. You wouldn't go to the Archbishop of Canterbury to ask about some crazy millenarian Christian cult. The Archbishop of Canterbury does not spend his time dealing with the ghastly murderous freaks of his religion. Instead you have to go to the people who are actually part of those movements or part of the small minority of scholars who do look at those small crazy aspects of Islam. I could go to my neighborhood imam and say “what do you think of ISIS,” but I would get mostly ignorance — because why would that neighborhood imam be spending his time thinking about ISIS? He generally has more urgent and immediate matters on his mind.

FSR: Was there ever any concern of being viewed as spreading ISIS' message to an audience that may otherwise not have read it? For example, even though I care about counterterrorism and terrorism issues, I don't, at the moment, spend a great deal of time looking through ISIS propaganda and such things, so they are not exactly reaching me. I did, however, definitely read your book and will continue to read similar books and coverage of ISIS.

GW: As a result of my article and my book, there are more people who know about what ISIS thinks. In that sense, I have spread the ISIS message. But there are different times when different types of journalism are appropriate. If we were at a stage where everyone already knew the basics of ISIS, if everybody *already* knew roughly what ISIS was and what they were trying to bring into the world, then it would be unconscionable for me just to say what ISIS wants. But, since we were at a stage where people really didn't know, and even had false impressions about what ISIS wanted, then simply to inform is a noble journalistic goal. That is what I was doing at that moment. People were saying falsehoods about what ISIS wanted. People were saying that ISIS was al-Qaeda, or that they were simply psychopaths, or

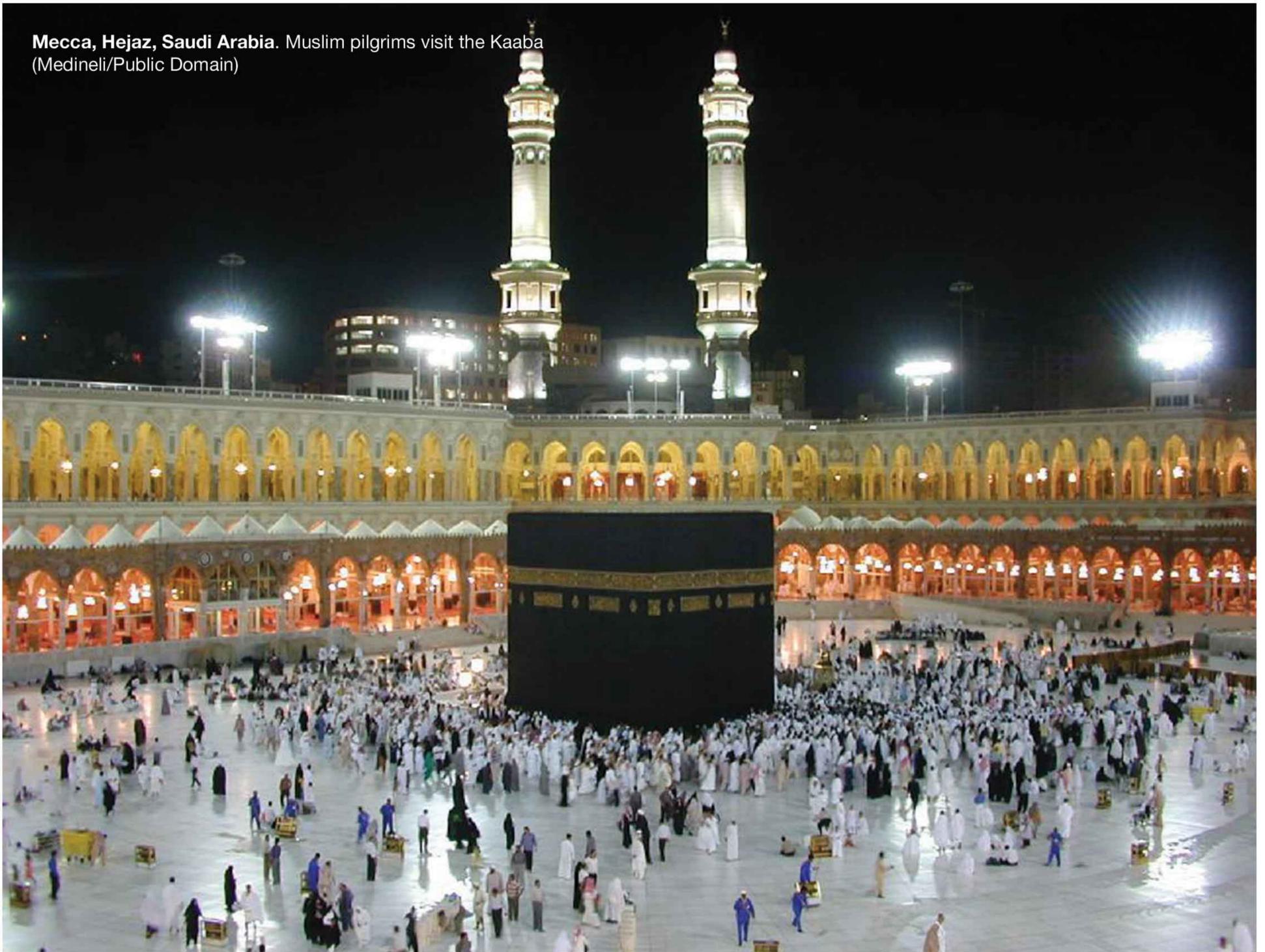
that they were Ba'athists. None of these was a correct apprehension of what ISIS was, through its own eyes.

We also have to remain aware of what journalism is. Some people say that this is “only helping ISIS” to write about them the way I do. Last I checked, the goal of journalism is not to help one side or the other. Journalism is not advocacy, and it is not propaganda. You can't expect every story to help the side you want to be helped.

FSR: That makes sense. One other major line of critique can be seen in a series of tweets from Shadi Hamid [also of the Brookings Institution]. In response to your reporting, he asks “can we take the ISIS point of view and hold it up as equally legitimate to other points of view?” He then goes on to say “Islam can't be just anything Muslims want.” Here he is quoting Bernard Haykel, in a saying which you and others have used many times. What he seems to be getting at is that there is a mainstream point of view here, so this method of defining Islam is maybe not quite adequate to describe ISIS. Where there is a mainstream or broad majority point of view, any particular group of Muslims doing things their own way should not be treated as equally legitimate, in terms of being provided attention or a platform for expressing their point of view.

GW: This phrase, quoting Bernard Haykel, is essentially a stock phrase within the social science of religion. “What is Islam? It's what Muslims believe, it's what Muslims do, it's what Muslims read.” Islam is a tradition, which we speak of in the most expansive terms. They are purely descriptive. We are not saying that one version is right and one version is wrong — because Muslims believe and do things that are contradictory, and all of what they do is Islam. A lot of the opponents of my view of the Islamic State as a religious organization want to step into normative territory and ask whether the Islamic State is *wrong*, whether they are the *wrong kind* of Muslims, whether it has the incorrect interpretation of Islam. But this is not what journalists do. Journalists do not opine about what the best type of religion is. If you were to read the *New York Times* and it said that “Catholics believe this, and therefore they are un-Christian,” you would wonder which editor was going to lose his job today because of letting that line slip through. As a journalist, I can only say whether a group is doing things that some people who call themselves Muslims have historically done, said, or argued

Mecca, Hejaz, Saudi Arabia. Muslim pilgrims visit the Kaaba
(Medineli/Public Domain)



— and in the case of the Islamic State, it is inarguable that they are doing those things. They are as legitimate as others, not because they represent a majority of Muslims, or because they are right, but because the whole sphere of what the “right type” of religion is is off-limits for journalists, as well as for social scientists like Shadi Hamid.

There is an irony in this impulse to draw strict boundaries around what Islam is. Many of the critiques of the “ISIS-is-Islamic” claim, especially from Muslims, are surprisingly similar to ISIS in this way. Even though they disagree with ISIS in the particulars of the religion, they agree that Islam is one thing. They disagree with the idea that Islam might be a bunch of different things, in the expansive, descriptive version of Islam. I take what I think of as the ultimate non-essentialist view of Islam, which is that Islam can be any number of things, from a huge complicated tradition and maybe more than one thing at once for an individual person.

Having this more complicated view of the religion and of the way that human beings live it is difficult for a lot of people and leads them to think too narrowly about what Islam and Muslims can be.

FSR: From a policy perspective and seeking to understand terrorism and formulate counterterrorism strategies, it seems that adopting that more expansive understanding would be very valuable to practitioners and people studying this problem in government and military institutions. In particular, it seems important for them to communicate this concept clearly.

GW: When we talk about the relationship between policy and religion, *most* of the time, we don’t have any difficulty separating these issues and understanding that people have religious views that are diverse and that are not determinative of their behavior, but also are not unrelated to their behavior. It’s weirdly an issue that arises particularly in security discussions related to Islam. You

get people, like certain members of the current administration, who seem to think that Islam *is* just one thing and that it determines everything that a Muslim does. I don't think that claim has much empirical basis behind it. It is a reaction to another view of Islam, advanced by the previous administrations, that Islam is peaceful, that it is only good, and that ISIS has nothing to do with Islam. What I think we could perhaps benefit from is a more sophisticated notion of how religion affects human behavior. We already internalize this more sophisticated view when talking about Christianity. We may as well do the same about Islam.

FSR: In your book, you talk about meeting two different religious scholars.

GW: Yasir Qadhi and Hamza Yusuf.

FSR: Yes, and they are very different. Yusuf is a Sufi, and more aligned with the Sufi view of Islam and Qadhi has, I think what many Americans would consider, a more hardline view.

GW: Right, and in fact both of them have been featured by ISIS as valid targets [to be killed].

FSR: That's terrifying to imagine. I think it was Yusuf, who points out his *ijaza* [his religious authority with Sufi tradition that symbolizes his learning and his ability to issue fatwas] to you. Right?

GW: That is correct.

FSR: ISIS doesn't care about that sort of authority at all. Their authority is their own. It's very interesting understanding sources of authority and what that means for interpretation. That is a discussion that is completely missing from public debate.

GW: With Hamza Yusuf of course it is not just the paper itself, it's what the paper represents. It's the fact that he comes out of an institutionalized tradition. The underlying belief is that knowledge of Islam takes time, and without time and patience you will not know it. ISIS basically rejects this. (Though ISIS scholars have *ijazas* as well and you can actually see the *ijaza* of Turki al-Bin-ali online, which was issued to him by Abu Muhammad al-Maqdisi.) ISIS will say that if my four-year-old daughter has a valid argument, then she can derive law, and the law would have to be followed.

Hamza Yusuf's 40-odd years of education in these matters would count for nothing. This view has huge implications for how they can be argued with. I don't see a whole lot of people acknowledging that. They ask whether Muslim scholars reject ISIS. And yes, Hamza Yusuf rejects ISIS. But the rejection takes the form of "if you spend the next 30 years studying what I've studied, then you will see that I'm right." ISIS is impatient. If they were willing to spend 30 years on this, then you wouldn't have had to convince them in the first place, because by the time they'd made up their minds they would be elderly and no longer fighting anyway. That is not a practical strategy for countering violent extremism.

FSR: You published a number of the responses that you received after your original piece in *The Atlantic*. The last one was from someone in ISIS. He says, "the leadership in ISIS is looking at historical texts and traditions and basically reading it as a how-to document or a strategy document." He says the reason that so many Muslims — and by Muslims he means members of ISIS — are reading your article and sharing it is because you get this. They are not scared that the powers that be will see this and use it to defeat them because members of ISIS know that governments will make the mistake of ignoring this. It sounds like the argument you are making is that we need to take them at their word and look at these texts to engage with ISIS, not necessarily on the same level, but using logic that they believe in or at least that meets the logic that they are using.

GW: I disagree slightly with your characterization of my position. I do think that we should understand what they believe. We should understand the origins of their intellectual and religious positions, understand what they consist of, where they've come from, and where they might be going. That does not mean that it is our job to propose a different type of Islam to them. It does not mean that we are forced into theological debate with them. Quite the opposite. I think it means that we would be wise to avoid theological debate. What we have done heretofore has been to engage in theological debate — but badly. It has been to say "your type of Islam is wrong. You don't know anything about Islam." Their reaction to that has rightly been to say "you know nothing about us. What you think you know about us is wrong and the arguments you have against us are less sophisticated than the arguments that we have in favor of our own position." What instead we

should be doing is allowing Muslims to hash these questions out among themselves and instead confronting ISIS with the tools we have at our disposal, including military and various forms of soft power.

I'll give you an example of this from a completely different sphere. My friend Megan Phelps Roper is formerly of the Westboro Baptist Church, a fundamentalist Christian group that has been picketing the funerals of American soldiers for years because they believe God is killing those soldiers as a punishment for overly permissive attitudes toward homosexuality. She says Christians would constantly go to the pickets of the Westboro Baptist Church and say "Read the Bible! It doesn't say what you say it says!" (She has left the church now and is a defector from it and has repented from the horrible things it has done.) She says the problem was definitely not that they did not know the Bible. They did nothing other than read the Bible! They just had an interpretation. By saying a clear falsehood — that the Westboro picketers didn't know the Bible, or that they weren't Christian — their enemies only strengthened the Westboro picketers' feeling that they are on the right track. There are other ways to confront them that are much more likely to be successful than this.

FSR: What would that look like in the case of the Islamic State?

GW: For us, speaking as Americans, the tools we have at our disposal are several. The military tools are important. The main counsel that I would give is humility. This is a group that represents strains within Muslim civilization that have existed for a long time and that we cannot counter by force alone, or indeed by theology alone. We need to limit ourselves to the aspects of this conflict that we can control. Those are military, they are diplomatic, they are to a certain extent taking advantage

of applied social science to understand who is vulnerable to these messages and rigging social policy to discourage people from falling for them. To actually stop people through religious means is something we have tried to do and failed.

FSR: When you are talking about social policies, I am thinking of the people you interviewed such as Musa [Cerantonio] in Australia. Their attraction, by their own testimony, was the logic of ISIS, though there may be much more going on behind their words. What I imagine some of that could be is seeing social policies that they felt alienated by or feeling their identity did not fit in with aspects of their societies. That is what I am hearing you talk about in terms of the social policies.

GW: Even when I am talking about social policy though, I am actually describing something hugely complicated and elusive. There are social policies that could make people wealthier and more educated and make them more integrated into the larger communities that they are part of. To a certain extent, those things might help. There are much more difficult social problems, though, to deal with here. People suffer a kind of anomie or dissatisfaction with modernity that, so far, we have no way to remedy. That is, they will look at the world ahead of them and the kinds of satisfaction that are available, and think it is inadequate and look for something much, much more radical. What we need to think about to affect people who are part of ISIS or are part of the potential ISIS recruitment base is how to craft policies that will give people more than just a job or livelihood but rather some meaning in their life, a deeper satisfaction that will keep them from seeking out this more sinister version of it in the form of ISIS.

FSR: Thank you for taking the time to speak to *FSR*. It was a pleasure to delve deeper into your ideas.

Graeme Wood

Graeme Wood is a correspondent for *The Atlantic*. He was the 2015 - 2016 Edward R. Murrow Press Fellow at the Council on Foreign Relations and is a lecturer in political science at Yale University. He was formerly a contributing editor to *The New Republic* and books editor of *Pacific Standard*. He was a reporter at *The Cambodia Daily* in Phnom Penh in 1999, then lived and wrote in the Middle East from 2002 to 2006. He has received fellowships from the Social Sciences Research Council (2002-2003), the South Asian Journalists Association (2009), the East-West Center (2009-2010), and the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum's Center for the Prevention of Genocide (2013-2014). He has appeared many times on television and radio (*CNN*, *ABC*, *BBC*, *MSNBC*, et al.), was the screenwriter of a Sundance Official Selection (2010, short film), and led a Nazi-hunting expedition to Paraguay for a History Channel special in 2009. (source: <https://gcaw.net/about-2/>)