

“Son of Lies”: History, Baghdadi and the Legacy of ISIS

Written by John A. Rees

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JOHN A. REES, JUN 22 2016

International Relations often looks to the ancient world for insights into modern politics. For instance, early IR undergraduate studies regularly include readings of the ‘Melian Dialogue’ and other accounts from the Peloponnesian War (431–404 BCE). This post explores a potential linkage between religion-led insurgencies in the distant past and in our present day.

One tangible expression of antiquity shaping modernity is the Western Wall in Jerusalem where millions of Jews draw religio-nationalist inspiration from the ancient ruins of the Second Temple razed by the Romans in 70CE. Due to centuries of Christian mythmaking, this date was said to mark the end of ancient Jewish resistance against Empire. Yet the Jewish War was only the first of three significant revolts against the power of Rome in this period. Indeed, the importance of the third resistance, led by Simeon Bar Cosiba in the second century CE, could help us interpret another religious revolt occurring today, namely, the ISIS rebellion.

One key difference between the Jewish War of 70CE and the uprising that began in 132CE is the role played by Bar Cosiba as a messiah figure. This latter revolt centred on a divinely appointed leader renamed in some ancient sources as Bar Cochba (“son of the star”). The messianic intensity of the uprising might also explain the severe repression that the Romans wrought upon Judea in the aftermath of the conflict in 135CE, far worse than sixty-five years earlier including the construction of a pagan city and a temple to the Roman god Jupiter where Jerusalem once proudly stood.

Instructive for us is the negative legacy of the Bar Cochba rebellion within Judaism itself. After the Bar Cochba defeat, all notions of political messianism – the hope that God would vanquish the foes of his chosen people and inaugurate a new political society under the authority of an anointed leader – were now considered at enmity with the true faith. This condemnation is revealed in yet another name change for Simeon Bar Cosiba that appears in the ancient record: once regarded as “son of the star”, rabbinic literature now tellingly casts him out as Bar Coziba (“son of lies”) which for the historian Stephen Wilson “expresses disillusionment with all messianic rebels” (1995).

Let’s now sketch on a broad canvas and consider parallels between the Bar Cochba rebellion and the rise of the Islamic State insurgency. Firstly, both movements grew from the ferment of decades of war driven, at least for their adherents, on the restoration of divine authority and sacred tradition under threat from pagan empires. Second, both movements lack widespread support in the diaspora communities they claim to represent. In the same way that Jews throughout the Roman Empire distanced themselves from the radical actions of Bar Cochba in Judea, some of the leading critics of ISIS operations are Muslim leaders and citizens living in pluralistic societies around the world.

Third, and most significantly, both the Bar Cochba and ISIS rebellions are distinct from their predecessors in building a quasi-state (evidenced by minted coinage in each case) that was led by a central divinely-chosen figure: Simeon Bar Cosiba as messiah, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi as caliph. Whilst messiahs and caliphs arise from different faiths, the wide-ranging traditions associated with each title mean that the kind of messiah that Bar Cochba was can, quite reasonably, be approximated to the kind of caliph that Baghdadi has declared himself to be. Each are leaders of a project fusing spirituality and territory in the creation of a divinely-guided political society.

Of course, with the aid of history we know what happened to Simeon Bar Cosiba and his movement, whereas the

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ISIS rebellion is still underway. Can we look to the past in this instance as a way of thinking about the future? In a limited way, we can. That Bar Cochba (“son of the star”) became Bar Coziba (“son of lies”) is telling because it serves as a theological judgment against those who might entertain notions of militant political messianism in the future. Indeed, such was the power of this religious condemnation, combined with the failure and destruction of the Jewish uprisings against Rome between 66-135CE, Jewish piety became revolutionised toward individual and community devotion to the Law and away from visions of political state-building (until the founding of modern Israel in 1948).

What will the legacy of Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi and his Islamic State be? Such a question may take decades to answer, but it is also one worth considering now, for several reasons. Firstly, the territorial project of ISIS – its brand distinctive against al-Qaeda and other Islamist insurgencies – is failing. The city of Fallujah has practically fallen and once Mosul and Raqqa follow, in what forebodes as a protracted humanitarian catastrophe, the centralised base of the caliph will no longer exist. (Escape, or succession will become unsustainable as the borders of ISIS territory are broken.)

Second, the collapse of the territorial project will likely provoke a theological crisis for ISIS followers and sympathisers. Though ISIS has an apocalyptic insurance policy that promises divine vindication in the face of defeat, the tangibility of the caliphate will be lost. Noted scholar Vali Nasr has written that “Sunni theologians and political theorists have always measured the worth of authority in terms of power” (2006). Applying this logic to ISIS as a Sunni extremist movement, the loss of central command may lead to a reconsideration of Baghdadi’s fundamental claim to rule. When such a reconsideration occurs, the legacy of ISIS may be theologically recast among followers and sympathisers. To this end, Bin Laden’s legacy (and an al-Qaeda style network) may prove more durable among global jihadists than the ISIS caliph.

Whilst the ISIS effect will not disappear overnight, the power to doubt the divine sanction of a failing movement is significant, not only for present adherents but also as a battlefield in countering recruitment strategies. As with the changing legacy of Simeon Bar Kosiba two millennia ago, the line between ultimate inspiration and ultimate deception may be a very fine one for the legacy of Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi. In the words of an anti-ISIS statement issued by Saudi Arabia’s most senior cleric: “Those sinners attribute their inhuman actions to Islam when they claimed an Islamic State, and Allah knows that the hypocrites are liars”.

About the author:

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