



**To Professor Pavel Hosek
Chair of Bronislav Ostransky's habilitation committee**

You kindly requested, on June 25, my writing an expert testimony as an opponent in Bronislav Ostransky's habilitation process. Here comes my report, which I open with two formal remarks: first, I have been part of several habilitation processes in the French system, where the thesis is an unpublished work, contrary to the present thesis, already published last year by Edinburgh University Press; second, my own works are repeatedly quoted in that thesis/book, which did not affect this report, neither positively nor negatively.

Dr Ostransky's ambitions in this research are clearly defined in the introduction to his thesis: studying the apocalyptic propaganda and attached agenda in ISIS, the self-proclaimed "Islamic State in Iraq and Syria", which implies addressing, through academic standards, a subject too often discarded as marginal, borderline or even delirious. Taking seriously the doomsday scenarios of the producers of such narratives is an essential part in understanding their mindsets and their ideological bias. In the rest of his thesis, there is no doubt that Dr Ostransky lives up to such intellectual expectations.

Chapter 1 offers a most welcome survey of the historical trends of Islamic eschatology, while the author points out that "the ISIS approach to the apocalypse skilfully links a number of very modern features to some of the most traditional elements". The distinction between apocalypticism and millennialism is rightfully maintained. The concepts of *fitna/fitan* (tribulation) and *malhama/malâhim* (battle) are described as central in the escalation to the doomsday confrontation. Nuaym Ibn Hammad (deceased in 843) is singled out as the medieval author whose eschatological traditions (*hadith/ahâdîth*) are most popular among jihadi circles, despite the disputes regarding the validity of such traditions.

Chapter 2 explores the transition from non-apocalyptic jihadism, as embodied by Bin Laden's Al-Qaida, to the doomsday-driven ISIS. Dr Ostransky describes how such transition develops on the background of the "packaging (of) the apocalypse for the mass market", therefore allowing the

“jihadist fuse” to meet the “millennial charge”. The works of two jihadi leaders, the Syrian Abu Musab al-Suri and the Jordanian Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, are analysed in that perspective.

Chapter 3, entitled “the topography of the Last Days”, explains how the ISIS expansion from Iraq to Syria was magnified through the apocalyptic lenses: the land of Sham (meaning either Damascus or Syria) is indeed central in doomsday scenarios, especially in Nuaym Ibn Hammad’s treatises; but even the mainstream hadith collections had situated in Dabiq and A’amaq, in Northern Syria, the theatre of a major doomsday battle. Dabiq and A’amaq, once occupied by ISIS, became the names respectively of its online magazine and of its “press agency”. Mistakenly, Dr Ostransky pretends that the Ottomans were defeated by the Mamluks in Dabiq in 1516 (page 90), while, on the contrary, the Ottoman triumph in Dabiq paved them the way to the conquest, in the following months, of the whole Mamluk-run Levant.

Chapter 4 studies the enrichment of jihadi apocalypticism since Zarqawi’s killing in 2006 and the subsequent transformation of the Iraqi branch of Al-Qaida into the “Islamic State in Iraq”. Unfortunately, Dr Ostransky misses the key to this transformation by dating at October 2007 (page 117) the first jihadi proclamation of an Iraqi-based caliphate, while it occurred in fact in October 2006. This baroque structure, with the Iraqi former officer Abu Umar al-Baghdadi as “caliph” and the Egyptian Abu Ayyub al-Misri (aka Abu Hamza al-Muhajir) as “minister of war” (but, most importantly, delegate of Al-Qaida central leadership), was proclaimed online and received very little publicity. Such a blatant failure was indeed reflected upon by Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, who amalgamated in his only own hands the two commands held by Abu Umar al-Baghdadi and Abu Ayyub al-Misri, after they were killed together in 2010. Dr Ostransky then studies the apocalyptic messages of ISIS magazines Dabiq and Rumiya, which replaced the former in 2016.

Chapter 5 deals with the “countdown to the apocalypse” and how ISIS has managed to build its self-proclaimed “Islamic State” while portraying itself as the “historical precursor of the dreamed-of Utopia”. Since “the timing of the Hour belongs only to God”, Dr Ostransky describes how ISIS succeeded in never losing control of the doomsday-driven energies it had nurtured for its own organizational objectives. He also studies how Internet became the privileged medium to convey the jihadi propaganda and enhance its apocalyptic content.

Chapter 6 focuses on the Islamic eschatological anti-ISIS discourse, demonstrating that doomsday narratives can always be manipulated both

ways. A prophetic hadith announcing the appearance of a “feeble insignificant folk” is, in that interpretation, supposed to fit ISIS eventual irrelevance. Jihadist militants have been associated, depending on their Sunni opponents, to the “Kharijites (Seceders) of today” or to the Dajjal/Antichrist supporters. Shia current doomsday revival has also integrated ISIS in its own eschatological scenario, often based on *Kitab al-Jafr*, allegedly attributed to Ali, the first imam of Shiism and fourth caliph of Islam.

Chapter 7 discusses the various dimensions and contradictions of ISIS apocalyptical bias. It also serves as a conclusion, even though this one is open-ended, with the book completed in the summer of 2018 and the so-called “military defeat” of ISIS in Syria announced before the book’s publication. Dr Ostransky’s final words (“The end of ISIS story has yet to be written...”) are actually fitting an evolving situation where Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, killed in October 2019, has now been replaced by Abu Umar al-Turkmani (among his numerous aliases).

Three appendixes, a glossary of Islamic eschatology, a brief chronology and an ISIS “apocalyptic reader” are very welcome additions to the book, even though the chronology suffers from several flaws (Saddam Hussein was executed in 2006, but months after Zarqawi’s killing; the “Islamic State in Iraq” (ISI) has, since its proclaiming in 2006, used the “black flag”; as soon as ISI turned into ISIS in April 2013, thanks to its entering Raqqa, along with other militias, it tried to absorb the Nusra front, the Al-Qaida Syrian branch, that resisted by enhancing its own ties to Al-Qaida central leadership; the divorce between the two branches of global jihadism occurred therefore in 2013, not as late as 2014).

Despite those minor mistakes, that should be corrected in any re-edition of the book, Dr Ostransky’s work stands as a commendable achievement of scholarly research inspired by a true sense of contemporary history. There is absolutely no doubt, after having read such a documented thesis, that Dr Ostransky deserves the habilitation.

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