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The Rationality of an Eschatological Movement: The Islamist State in Iraq and Syria

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Abstract

Commonly described as mad, fanatic, and medieval, the Islamic State is a political enigma. The behavior of its militants, its relationship with the local society and its relationship with the rest of the world are all puzzling. While extensive research into the operational structures of the Islamic State is hindered by the clandestine nature of the organization, this paper aims to overcome these difficulties by drawing on over 60 interviews conducted within Syria and Iraq between 2012-2015. These interviews not only examine the emergence, expansion and success of the Islamic State, they also highlight the everyday conditions of those living under its grip. We argue that the perceived irrationality of the Islamic State results from the formation of a new regime of truth, based on an eschatological reading of Islam, which subordinates the alternative modes of veridiction. The Islamic State's regime of truth allows the coexistence within the same organization of a rational-legal system, an ethic of conviction, and a charismatic legitimacy. To develop our argument, we look successively at the closure of the organization, the imposition of its revolutionary model upon society, and its relationship to the outside world, highlighting its consistency at each level.

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Disclaimer

The findings, interpretations, and conclusions expressed in this paper are entirely those of the authors and do not necessarily represent the views of the Program on Governance and Local Development.

1. Introduction

The creation of the caliphate was announced in each mosque by an Islamic State fighter who was taking the place of the usual imam. The members of Daesh were mad! We saw military parades with tanks, Scud missiles, and even fighters on horseback.... Before the caliphate, we had the feeling that the Islamic State still did not dare to carry out their ideas. But after the proclamation, they considered that they had all the rights. And the population started being really afraid.¹

Baghdad's sectarian policy after the United States' 2010 withdrawal from Iraq and the war in Syria favored the re-emergence of a Sunni insurgency under the umbrella of the self-declared Islamic State.² The Islamic State's alliance with former Ba'athists and certain Sunni insurgent groups enabled the organization to conquer most of the Sunni territories in Iraq and part of Syria in just a few weeks, thus consolidating a transnational territory across the two countries. On June 29, 2014, the Islamic State proclaimed a caliphate with Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi as caliph, and Leader of the Believers (*Amir al-Mu'minin*).³

Commonly described as mad, fanatic, and medieval, the Islamic State is a political enigma. Indeed, the behavior of its militants, its relationship with society and its relationship with the rest of the world are all puzzling. Is the propensity of its militants to carry out suicide attacks on such scale a sign of a peculiar irrationality? Why impose with such extreme brutality a social order that undermines the economic and demographic bases of the caliphate they intend to impose? What is the logic of a movement which, in a situation of strategic emergency, alienates potential supporters by attacking left, right, and center, and broadcasts dramatic videos of its ultra-violence? We argue that these three puzzles are all the consequence of the internal organization and ideology of the Islamic State.

Observers struggle to understand the logic behind the thinking of the Islamic State. The analyses of the Islamic State as a terrorist movement cannot account for it overseeing several million

¹ Interview I-41 with a Syrian activist from Al-Raqqah. Skype interview. 28 Feb. 2015.

² "Iraq: Falluja's Faustian Bargain." *Crisis Group*. Middle East Report, 28 Apr. 2014.

<http://www.crisisgroup.org/en/regions/middle-east-north-africa/iraq-iran-gulf/iraq/150-iraq-falluja-s-faustian-bargain.aspx>.

³ We have chosen to use the term "Islamic State" in this text. In the interviews conducted, we encountered this term (*al-Dawla al-Islamiyya*, in Arabic) and "Daesh," which is an Arabic acronym with a negative connotation.

people. Moreover its violence is only marginally directed against Westerners (Hegghammer and Nesser 2015). Furthermore, psychological explanations in terms of deviance, brainwashing, cult-like phenomena or fanaticism clash focuses on individual behavior and misses the organizational dynamic, which is a necessary element for any explanation of the Islamic State. In addition, analogies with other Islamist movements in their relationship with society are only partially enlightening. The moral order imposed on the population and the destruction of archaeological sites invite comparison with other movements, such as the Taliban in Afghanistan, Ansar Dine in Mali, or Al-Shabaab in Somalia (O'Dell 2014; Centlivres 2008). Yet the Islamic State is not simply a more extreme version of existing Islamist movements; it follows a distinct logic. For example, the generalized use of *takfir* (excommunication) and the systematic massacres of non-Sunnis are traits specific to the Islamic State. Moreover, whereas the Taliban movement sought to integrate the Islamic Emirates of Afghanistan into the state system (Dorransoro 2005), the Islamic State rejects the underlying principles of the international order. Finally, far from constituting a resurgence of a form of tradition, the rational–legal functioning of the Islamic State, its affinity with technology, its discourses, and its stated objectives indicate a modern, globalized movement (Wood 2015).

To solve this puzzle, we introduce Michel Foucault's concept of "regime of truth." According to Foucault (1977),

Each society has its regime of truth, its "general politics" of truth: that is, the types of discourse which it accepts and makes function as true; the mechanisms and instances which enable one to distinguish true and false statements, the means by which each is sanctioned; the techniques and procedures accorded value in the acquisition of truth; the status of those who are charged with saying what counts as true.

The regime of truth conditions the criteria of admissibility of an argument within a community. The perceived irrationality of the Islamic State results from the formation of a new regime of truth, based on an eschatological reading of Islam, which subordinates the alternative modes of veridiction, whether judicial, scientific, or ethical (Foucault 2011).⁴ This 'general politics of truth' sets it apart from the Iraqi and Syrian societies, and even from the rest of Islamist insurgencies.

⁴ In totally different ideological contexts, one remembers Soviet Lysenkoism and the Nazi attacks on Einstein's theory of relativity.

The apocalyptic *weltanschauung* constitutes the backbone of the ideology of the Islamic State. In a charismatic rationale, the movement's victories are seen as proof of divine support; the return of the caliphate signals the end of historical time and the soon-to-come victory of Islam.⁵ Furthermore, the Islamic State embraces Salafism at its most severe (Cole 2015). Yet, its particularity resides in a very peculiar practice of takfir (Adang, Ansari, Fierro, and Schmidtke 2015). In a logic inspired by Sayyid Qutb and remotely by Ibn Taymiyyah, a refusal to swear allegiance to the Islamic State and its caliph warrants the excommunication of individuals or groups (Alshech 2014). The Islamic State justifies the death of all political opponents, regardless of their individual religious observances.

The Islamic State's extreme 'network closure' enables it to actualize its ideology (Coleman 1990); at the same time, the concept of a "regime of truth" is essential to the internal functioning of the movement. First, an eschatological interpretation of the world reduces the cognitive dissonance created by the military defeats and the lack of popular support, preserving the charismatic nature of the movement (Festinger et al. 1964). Moreover, takfiri discourse fuels compartmentalization, which enables mass atrocities and slavery (De Swaan 2015). Finally, this regime of truth limits the tensions inside the organization. On the one hand, charisma is depersonalized, in the sense that it stems more from the movement than from its leader, but legal-rational organization is necessary to the movement's survival in a context of extreme military pressure (Weber 1978: 1111–1158). On the other hand, the regime of truth facilitates the aligning of individual behavior with organizational interest. The militants of the Islamic State fight to fulfill the objective of the movement, which is the realization of the Islamic reign on earth (the "Promise of Allah"). While proof of divine favor lies in the movement's worldly success, for the militants, rewards are to be found in the afterlife. They behave according to an ethic of conviction, which also explains the total sacrifice by those fighters ready to commit suicide attacks (Weber 2015). Altogether, the Islamic State's regime of truth allows the coexistence within the same organization of a rational legal system (March and Revkin 2014), an ethic of conviction, and a charismatic legitimacy. To develop our argument, we will look successively at the closure of the organization, the imposition of its revolutionary model upon society, and its relationship to the outside world, highlighting its consistency at each level.

⁵ This vision pervades all of the Islamic State's videos and publications. For an example, see "Al Qaeda of Waziristan," *Dabiq*, Issue 6, <http://media.clarionproject.org/files/islamic-state/isis-isil-islamic-state-magazine-issue-6-al-qaeda-of-waziristan.pdf>.

It is important to note that limited available data makes research on the Islamic State methodologically problematic. Researchers are unable to visit the area under the control of the Islamic State, and no available source reliably describes the decision mechanisms within the movement. A handful of journalistic accounts regarding the Islamic State's funding, preaching, and treatment of minorities have been written, but they are generally based on thin facts. What is known of the Islamic State's governance is based mainly on these press accounts (Caris and Reynolds 2014), Internet sources, and policy reports.⁶ The specificity of our work relies on our fieldwork, which comprises over 60 interviews. Three of the authors traveled in northern Syria in 2012 and 2013, when the Islamic State was taking over territories and imposing its rule. Arthur Quesnay has been doing fieldwork in Arab–Sunni Iraqi territories since 2009, and his data allow us to understand the socioeconomic dynamics of these regions. Over 25 semi-structured interviews were carried out with recently settled internally displaced people (IDPs) during a stay in northern Iraq in January–February 2015, in the territories controlled by the Kurdish Peshmergas. These interviews were generally conducted with several people at a time. Finally, eleven semi-structured interviews were carried out in March via Skype with Syrians who have lived or still live in the territories controlled by the Islamic State in the governorates of Aleppo, Raqqah, and Deir ez-Zor.

2. The Closure of the Islamic State

The Islamic State's closure enables the imposition of an eschatological discourse, which in turn increases the alienation of its militants from the outside world. Under the name of al-Qaeda in Mesopotamia, the Islamic State emerged during the American occupation of Iraq as a small group of militants isolated from the rest of society. It developed a specific organizational culture, pervaded by violence. Its militarized and centralized character precluded deliberation. This closure derived from a three-part legacy: the authoritarian practices inherited from the Ba'athist party, the shared experience of imprisonment during the American intervention after 2003, and the absolute secrecy that resulted from international surveillance and targeted killings. The presence of foreign fighters increased the closed nature of the group. The lack of transition from

⁶ International Crisis Group, the Soufan Group, and the Institute for the Study of War published the most informative reports on the Islamic State. "Iraq: Falluja's Faustian Bargain." *Middle East Report* No. 150, *International Crisis Group*. 28 Apr 2014. <http://www.crisisgroup.org/en/regions/middle-east-north-africa/iraq-iran-gulf/iraq/150-iraq-falluja-s-faustian-bargain.aspx>; Caris, Charles C., and Samuel Reynolds. "ISIS Governance in Syria." *Middle East Security Report* 22, *Institute for the Study of War*. 2014. Web <<http://www.understandingwar.org/report/isis-governance-syria>>; Baret, Richard. "The Islamic State," Nov. 2014. < <http://soufangroup.com/wp-content/uploads/2014/10/TSG-The-Islamic-State-Nov14.pdf>>.

the clandestine oppositional phase to the seizing of power in parts of Iraq and Syria favored a particularly brutal revolutionary moment. The Islamic State governs via repression and terror, with a centrality given to intelligence institutions that recall the Ba'athist regimes. Finally, the judicial institutions, often at the center of other Islamist insurgencies, and public services are secondary, despite propagandistic videos and publications targeting foreigners that place them at the fore.

2a. A Culture of Clandestine Action

The Islamic State's clandestine character partly explains the extraordinary distance between the population and the militants. The movement was born of a shared experience of the American prisons of Iraq, which were where leaders built their networks (paradoxically, the prisons were safer places to network than outside), and where Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi and the leadership of the movement successfully imposed their authority.⁷ An inhabitant of Tikrit described this with regard to a friend who fought first with Al-Qaeda and then with the Islamic State:

From Tikrit originally, he was mistakenly arrested during a raid by the American army in 2006. He was held prisoner for five years in the Buka prison in southern Iraq. The prisoners were piled up in collective cells, regardless of their offense, which enabled the Islamic State to recruit and train new fighters. My friend was an economics graduate of the University Tikrit and had been unemployed since 2003, he was a perfect target for their recruitment. During his five years in prison, he went through a full ideological indoctrination. When he was freed in 2011, he came back to settle in Tikrit and then disappeared without trace.⁸

Second, and often stemming from cohabitation in prison, some Ba'athist elements have joined the nascent Islamic State, further reinforcing a culture of violence and secrecy. According to an inhabitant of Tal Afar (Mosul governorate):

Abu Muslim al-Turkmani, also known as Saud, is a former inhabitant of Tal Afar whom my family knew well before 2003. He was a colonel in the Iraqi army under Saddam. At the fall of the [Iraqi] regime, he started working normally and tried to

⁷ I-3 with a tribal leader from Hawija, Kirkuk. 13 May, 2013.

⁸ I-56 with an inhabitant of Tikrit, Erbil. 20 Mar. 2015.

open several businesses that failed. Unemployed and threatened by the policies of de-Ba'athification, he joined the insurgency in Mosul and then entered al-Qaeda. His military experience rapidly made him someone important in the organization. He indeed managed to convince many of Saddam's former officers to join him, which enabled him to build a network of trusted experts in clandestine actions, military operations, espionage.... His trajectory is not clear, but when Mosul fell, he appeared in the organizational charter of the Islamic State as one of the seven lieutenants of Baghdadi, in charge of special operations.⁹

The presence of former Iraqi military personnel within the Islamic State underlines the importance of the transfer of skills from the former regime to the organization. A former Islamist opponent of Saddam Hussein's regime notes that,

The current practices of the Islamic State were brought by the officers of the former regime. Without them, it would have been impossible for the Islamic State to transform so rapidly into such a well-organized armed movement with a security apparatus as opaque as it is efficient. These are the same methods as those under Saddam's dictatorship.¹⁰

Third, the American covert operations necessitated the maintenance of a high level of secrecy and instilled paranoia in the entire organization. The surveillance and communication-interception capabilities of the American military made the strictest security rules paramount for survival. "The members of the Islamic State live in fear and are constantly under surveillance," explains an inhabitant of Hawija. "Everyone spies on everyone in an environment of generalized paranoia."¹¹ Between 2003 and 2009, any time security was relaxed most members of that network were arrested or eliminated by the United States Special Forces. The fighters who have survived have exceptionally rigorous clandestine practices. In addition, The Islamic State has learned a lot from the counterinsurgency techniques used by the United States' army in Iraq, notably the use of local intermediaries to fight the insurgency during the 2007 implementation of the *sabwa* (*Ḥarakat al-Şahwa al-Sunijya*), or Sunni Awakening Movement, militias. This forced the movement into forming an intelligence apparatus charged with controlling the militants and

⁹ I-57 with a former inhabitant of Tal Afar, Kirkuk. 12 Feb. 2015.

¹⁰ I-58 with the leader of the Iraqi Islamic Party, Kirkuk. 26 Mar. 2015.

¹¹ I-59 with a tribal notability of Hawija, Kirkuk. 23 Mar. 2015.

averting the counterinsurgency operations. In Syria, a fighter from Raqqah and former member of the Free Syrian Army tells us that

Before its takeover in January 2014, Daesh took interest in tribal society and social divides. The idea for Daesh was to go slowly to not repeat the mistakes that had been made in Iraq. It included infiltrating the poor neighborhoods and spotting which groups and individuals were feeling humiliated or frustrated and thus could be susceptible to working with them. There was quite obviously an element of class revenge that Daesh exploited successfully and that was ignored by the rest of the opposition. The Islamic State grew on the outcasts of the revolution. The FSA [Free Syrian Army] was thus taken aback.¹²

Furthermore, the presence of tens of thousands of foreign fighters (up to 30,000, according to sources¹³) is reinforcing the closure of the organization, as the foreign fighters have no ties with the population and fully depend upon the organization. Many fighters come with their families and move into the same neighborhoods, notably in Raqqah and Mosul. “In Raqqah, ISIL fighters are sometimes Syrians, but the large majority of emirs are foreigners. It is very difficult to negotiate with them and we fear them a lot,” an inhabitant explained to us in September 2013.¹⁴ The Islamic State limits its militants’ interactions with the general population as much as possible.

In general, Daesh avoids all relationships between its members and society. When I was arrested for the first time, I managed to negotiate my liberation with an emir from Raqqah of the Bariaj clan (Afadla tribe), thanks to common acquaintances. But this was at the start of Daesh’s presence. Now I don’t think it would still be possible. This emir was transferred just after my liberation, because he would do favors for people he knew by being from Raqqah. Daesh has always tried to avoid letting its emirs establish bonds with society. Often, they place local personalities in important roles when they need to control a territory and a population. Once they feel certain of their control, they name an outsider for the job and move the local personality. The ties between the organization and the

¹² I-45 with a Raqqah inhabitant from Raqqah. Skype interview. 27 Feb. 2015.

¹³ In June 2014, about 12,000 foreign fighters had joined rebel groups in Syria, including the Islamic State, since 2011; see Soufan report: <<http://soufangroup.com/foreign-fighters-in-syria/>>. By Dec. 2015, this figure has risen to approximately 30,000. <<http://soufangroup.com/foreign-fighters/>>.

¹⁴ In the Islamic State, the term emir refers to a member of a high-ranking civil and military cadre. I-60 with an activist from Raqqah, in Urfa. Sept. 2013.

population are useful only during the first phase of control. And, generally, the cadres are changed regularly.¹⁵

This closure comes with an *impersonal brotherhood*, which is notably expressed through specific terms of address. The fighters generally call one another *haji* or *akhi* (brother) and implement a revolutionary brotherhood that recalls communist terms of address, such as “comrade”. Furthermore, all of our observations, interviews, and the available videos match and describe a movement that has developed a particular aesthetic. This insistence on external appearance highlights the desire to create a shared identity among militants. The members of the Islamic State dress the Afghan way—even more precisely, the Kandahari way: mid-calf pants and long shirts. The colors vary: white, black, and brown are the most common, with no flashy colors. The men have long hair and beards and often line their eyes with kohl, thus conforming to the global image of Jihadism.

2b. A Security-Centered Bureaucracy

Although the movement manipulates symbols of Muslim culture, the state-like organization takes classic bureaucratic forms.¹⁶ The Ba’athist vision of the state plays a central role in explaining the organization of the caliphate. The Islamic State, even before the territorial conquest, had developed a viable archive system, as shown by its annual reports (*al-Naba*).¹⁷ An executive *shura* council and a military council, along with deputy assistants, assist the caliph in his decisions. These are generally former companions trained during the American occupation and accustomed to the discipline of the organization. The efficiency of this first circle of battle-hardened fighters enables the Islamic State to ensure the cohesion of the tens of thousands of militants who carry out the daily functions of the movement and fight on the frontline. Though very little information comes out of this inner circle of militants due to the clandestine nature of

¹⁵ I-45, with an inhabitant from Raqqah. Skype interview. 27 Feb. 2015.

¹⁶ The caliphate is divided into eighteen provinces (*wilayat*): Al Anbar, Baghdad, Diyala, Fallujah, al-Janub (the south), Kirkuk, Nineveh, Salahuddin (Iraq), Aleppo, al Badiah (Homs), al Baraka (Hasaka), Damascus, Hama; Idlib; al Khair (Deir ez-Zor), al Raqqah, al Sahel (Latakia) in Syria, and al-Furat between Syria and Iraq.

¹⁷ For 2012–2013: "Military Operation Islamic State Periodical Bulletin in Iraq and Syria," at <https://azelin.files.wordpress.com/2013/08/islamic-state-of-iraq-and-al-shc481m-22harvest-of-operations-for-the-year-1433-h-in-iraq22.pdf>; for the 2013–2014 ISIS operation, see Al-Binc: <https://azelin.files.wordpress.com/2014/04/al-binc481-magazine-1.pdf>. The Institute for the Study of War analyzed both files and deemed them accurate; see "ISIS Annual Reports Reveal a Metrics-Driven Military Command." 22 May 2014. [Web. \[http://www.understandingwar.org/sites/default/files/ISWBackgrounder_ISIS_Annual_Reports_0.pdf\]\(http://www.understandingwar.org/sites/default/files/ISWBackgrounder_ISIS_Annual_Reports_0.pdf\).](http://www.understandingwar.org/sites/default/files/ISWBackgrounder_ISIS_Annual_Reports_0.pdf)

the organization, there seem to be institutional mechanisms dealing with the leadership, especially the selection of the caliph (March and Revkin 2014).

However, because of quick expansion and military constraints, the Islamic State's administration varies across localities. There is a significant difference between urban and rural areas, for example. In addition, the front zones, mostly in rural areas, are not stable enough to implement a proper administration, and, in a few places, the power balance with local tribes forces the Islamic State to adopt a certain wariness.

The movement has limited—and declining—resources with which to pay for its militants-cum-bureaucrats and public services. Its resources come mainly from oil smuggling and taxes irregularly collected from residents of cities such as Raqqah and Mosul. In Iraq,

the Islamic State gets more from fines than from taxes. Thus, when the inhabitants go to pick up their salaries, the sum debited is more of a sanction than a tax. Before the Islamic State, the government would debit a fixed amount on banking operations. Since then the Islamic State debits a different amount according to the businesses. It varies from 5 to 10 percent.¹⁸

Behind the image of a cohesive institutional structure, the Islamic State has struggled to apply unified procedures to the entire territory under its control. In Tikrit, there are no taxes, but the Islamic State has distributed a guide on *zakat* (obligatory Islamic alms-giving); in Manbij, companies and businesses are taxed according to their size, and families must pay for water and electricity.¹⁹ Around Gwer, a progressive tax has been implemented, reaching 5 percent for the richest. For a small shop, the price is around \$200 per month; double that for a larger shop. Moreover, as explained by a businessman from Kirkuk:

The Islamic State indirectly takes money from shops and businessmen, as well as from the families that leave the zones under its control. The checkpoints between the territories of the Islamic State and the KRG [Kurdistan Regional Government

¹⁸ I-18, IDP of villages near Mosul, Debag. 29 Jan. 2015.

¹⁹ I-43, with an inhabitant of Manbij. Skype interview. 12 Mar. 2015.

in Iraq] are important for the businessmen and small-scale smugglers who continue to sign contracts in Mosul.²⁰

Public services are not a priority for the movement; they function irregularly. The Islamic State intends to exercise control without having the means to deeply transform existing institutions.

There are certain services in Raqqah, but generally speaking Daesh does not want to spend money and settles for the minimum when it does not cost them too much. For example, Daesh has taken over the electricity infrastructures in Raqqah and Tabqa. Daesh provides electricity to the population and sells some to [the Syrian] regime. In reality, it is the employees of the regime that do all the work and who continue to get their salaries (for those who can travel to the regime zones). Daesh does nothing. All they do is produces bills through the Administration of Islamic Services [Hayat al-Khadamat al-Islamiya].²¹

Furthermore, following the centralized Ba'athist regime model, security institutions are at the core of the system. The Security Office (Maktab al-Amniya) is the equivalent of the former Iraqi regime's intelligence services, and former members of Saddam Hussein's security apparatus are said to play an important role. Its operatives are anonymous and monitor the wider membership of the organization. An inhabitant of Raqqah explains:

They take care of anything serious. We do not know much about them. They have a branch specializing in house search and arrests. For example, those who came to search my house were from the security office. They are the most powerful. It seems that they work in secrecy and apparently independently from any other Islamic State institution. Even the members of the Islamic State fear them. My family tried to find out about the search at my place. They went to the Complaints Office and to the Islamic Court and no one was able to tell them the reasons behind the search. Even worse, the officials said that no one had done a search and that they had no record of such an event. The people from the Security Office are a bit different from the other members. They are often Iraqis—former officers and war veterans. There also are people from Raqqah,

²⁰ I-27, with an inhabitant of Kirkuk. In Kirkuk. 24 Jan. 2015.

²¹ I-46, with an inhabitant of Raqqah. Skype interview. 25 Feb. 2015.

and some Tunisians. Those are the most feared ones; they are the most radical and bloodthirsty.²²

2c. Justice and Revolutionary Violence

To control the population in the most important cities, the Islamic State has implemented a judicial system with courts (Makhkama al-Sharia) and a police force (Shurta al-Islamiyya). For the Islamic State, Islamic law (Sharia) is a core condition of the legitimacy of its governance and is used to justify the absence of consultation of the population. It informs all aspects of the militants' behavior. The Sharia tribunals apply severe sentences: amputation of a hand for theft, stoning for adultery, execution for homosexuals, beheading, hanging, and crucifixion, etc. "The new rules are posted in the mosques and announced in bazaars via cars with loudspeakers. The sentences—executions, amputations for theft, lashes—are carried out publicly. People are invited to witness them, and the bodies are put on display in the bazaars. Photographs are permitted."²³

Punishments often vary for the same offense.²⁴

I don't think that the sentences are codified somewhere. I never saw written that it is 20 lashes for a cigarette, even if that is what we get in general. Sometimes they force people to learn some verses of the Koran, or to undertake Islamic training. These kinds of punishment are more frequent for felonies related to praying—for example, if someone walks in the streets during prayer, or for a shop owner, if they haven't closed their business. But we don't always go to the judge. Sometimes the members of the Hesba [Diwan al-Hesba, or Regulation Bureau] punish us on the spot. Once they saw me smoking a cigarette and took my packet and forced me to eat the remaining cigarettes. Another time, they simply randomly stopped me and smelled my fingers. Of course they smelled of cigarette, so they hit my fingers with their gun handle. Some friends were arrested

²² I-41, with an IDP of Raqqah. Skype interview. 28 Mar. 2015.

²³ I-15, with an IDP of Alam, Kirkuk. 26 Jan. 2015.

²⁴ According to Andrew March and Mara Revkin, this could be due to the application of the doctrine of *siyasa shar'iyya*, which "sets up a kind a dualistic model of law and governance. On the one hand, the system requires sharia courts for the application of Islamic legal rules in routine matters for which specific rules exist. But it recognizes that rules do not exist for every conceivable matter. And so the "siyasa shar'iyya" theory posits that there are legitimate authorities—from market inspectors to military commanders and governors up to the caliph himself—that have the right to make lawlike decisions as long as those decisions are issued solely with the welfare (*maslaha*) of the Muslim community in mind and do not violate known laws." (2014.)

by the Hesba, which decided on a number of lashes without going through the Islamic court. I do not understand their logic. I don't think that they bother much about procedures. When they feel like it, they do not go to the judge.²⁵

The Islamic justice courts determine punishment for deviations from the moral code, but, in contrast to a movement such as the Taliban, which uses justice as a tool to penetrate society (Baczko 2013), the Islamic State mainly uses judges to enforce its rule. Though the Islamic State has called upon people to file complaints against its fighters,²⁶ our interviews suggest that it is difficult, even risky, for people to go to the courts. An Iraqi from Baiji told us that

it is not easy to go to the Islamic Court to file a complaint. To have access to the Islamic Court you need an authorization from the chief of the neighborhood [*mondir al-nariya*] or the village [*mondir al-belda*], who will send the request to the tribunal. In general, the only ones to go are those arrested by the Islamic State. They are brought there by force by fighters without the ability to ensure their defense before the judge.²⁷

Furthermore, most of the repression against moral or political deviance takes place outside of the courts, through the Security Office and the Bureau of Regulation (*Diman al-Hisba*). An inhabitant of the Mosul region explains that

The Bureau of Regulation is the local executive. Five people work there; they are charged with making sure the population respects religious rules. These five people are from the village. They live in their own houses. They are the same people they were before the arrival of the Islamic State, but with beards. They know everyone in the village and were chosen for that reason.²⁸

More generally, the role of fear is central for the government of the Islamic State.

²⁵ I-46, with an inhabitant of Raqqah. Skype interview. 25 Feb. 2015.

²⁶ "Caliphate of Islamic State call for subjects to appear before the board of grievances for any complaint against its soldiers or its Emirs," document printed by ISIS and published online by the Islamic News Agency. Dec. 2014. <http://www.dawaalhaq.com/?p=21065>. Quoted by Mara Revkin, "The Legal Foundations of the Islamic State," *Syria Comment*. <http://www.joshualandis.com/blog/legal-foundations-islamic-state-mara-revkin/>.

²⁷ I-21, with Sunni Arab IDPs from Baiji, Khanaqin. 31 Jan. 2015.

²⁸ I-18, with IDPs of villages near Mosul, Debaga. 29 Jan. 2015.

The Islamic State does not want to control the city council and only creates a security apparatus to control the population. The people are held through fear, as many videos of executions circulate between mobile phones. Even if there are no public executions, there is a real fear of reprisal. In general, when the Islamic State arrests someone, no one ever gets any news.²⁹

Spying and denunciations are omnipresent. Children are used as informants. Rumors regarding the prowess of the Islamic State intelligence most likely exaggerate, but they add to the fear. The public and publicized executions are part of a strategy to strike terror in the local population. Accounts indicate that the Bureau of Regulation gathers passersby (men, women and children) to make them watch executions. In Mosul, 22 people accused of homosexuality were thrown from the top of a building in front of hundreds of people who had been gathered by the Islamic State for the event. The many execution videos that circulate amplify the effects of the executions. Furthermore, the families of those arrested by the Islamic State can't obtain any information on their loved ones; instead, there are rumors of people who have disappeared being executed and incinerated.

3. Politicization of Society

The closure of the Islamic State allows it to impose its rule on millions of Iraqis and Syrians. The cost is the destruction of their society. The re-foundation of social relations happens through targeting suspect categories, eliminating intermediaries and local notables, and the moralization of individuals. Firstly, the Islamic State redefines the political community through the oath of allegiance to the caliph Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, which implies an adhesion to the Sunni denomination. Anyone can become a member of the Islamic State. Still, even within the Sunni population itself, certain groups, considered “enemies within,” are being watched, expelled, or killed. The Islamic State refuses political intermediaries to individualize the relationship between subjects and the Islamic State. Finally, on the individual level, the Islamic State imposes a moral order, which aims at disciplining and mobilizing individuals.

²⁹ I-16, with IDPs, Debaga. 28 Jan. 2015.

3a. *A New Body Politic*

The political community is bound by the bayat, or oath of allegiance to the caliph Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, which presupposes either belonging to or a conversion to Sunnism, independent of ethnicity or nationality. Thus, one of the deputy assistants of Baghdadi is a Turkmen, and some fighters are Kurdish, Caucasian, Europeans, etc. The call to Muslims to perform hegira (migration to Muslim lands), presented as a religious duty, is constantly present in the Islamic State propaganda. The Islamic State aims to increase its population by preventing the emigration and encouraging the immigration of Sunnis. In *Dabiq*, the Islamic State's online magazine, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi declares that "The State is a State for all Muslims. The land is for the Muslims, all the Muslims. Muslims everywhere, whoever is capable of performing hijra to the Islamic State, then let him do so, because hijra to the land of Islam is obligatory."³⁰ Beyond the theological aspect, the Islamic State aims to fill the need for cadres by calling upon trained foreigners.³¹ Moreover, it is forbidden to leave the Islamic State for good, and someone wishing to travel outside of the caliphate must have a guarantor (*kafil*) and provide a document testifying to where he lives and the names of his family members. If the traveler does not return, his family can be arrested, his house destroyed, and his guarantor executed. In al-Alam, "if a person is absent more than fifteen days, they execute his guarantor."³²

Being Sunni does not suffice, as the Islamic State aims to purify the Sunni community. Unaffiliated or suspect Sunnis are considered infidels (*kufar*). As is often the case in revolutionary situations, the Islamic State keeps close surveillance of the population. This recalls the terror during the French Revolution or even certain aspects of the Soviet Union and the Khmer Rouge in Cambodia. In Iraq, members of the army, the police, and the militias are targeted, as they are suspected of making up a fifth column. The Islamic State seized possession of the official records during the fall of Mosul; they have a list of policemen and members of the military that they consult at road checkpoints. Officers are usually killed; the movement attitude toward soldiers is more ambiguous. When members of security forces flee, the Islamic State occupies or dynamites

³⁰ "The Return of Khilafah." *Dabiq* 1. <http://media.clarionproject.org/files/09-2014/isis-isis-islamic-state-magazine-Issue-1-the-return-of-khilafah.pdf> p. 6.

³¹ "A Message to the Mujahidin and the Muslim Ummah in the Month of Ramadan" was released on 1 Jul. 2014, by the Islamic State's al-Furqan Media Foundation. Additional translations of the transcript in English, Russian, French, German, and Albanian were then issued by the Islamic State's al-Hayat Media Center. <https://news.siteintelgroup.com/Jihadist-News/islamic-state-leader-abu-bakr-al-baghdadi-encourages-emigration-worldwide-action.html>

³² I-15 with IDPs of Nineveh Governorate and Kirkuk. 26 Jan. 2015.

their houses. Those who stay must repent their former opposition to the Islamic State. In a restricted time frame, usually around 20 days, they must sign the document of formal repentance (*al-Tawba*), pay a fine ranging from \$2,000 to \$3,000, and surrender their weapons. A former soldier from the Gayara district explained,

I discovered the functioning of the repentance at my return. You have to register at a special office of the Islamic State. You have to give your identity and give back your weapon. You do not have to swear the oath of allegiance. The Islamic State does not register us as Muslims but as people who have left the faith because of our collaboration with the Iraqi government.³³

They must always have a guarantor, and they cannot leave for more than a few days. In addition, the mukhtars, administrative relays of the central government in villages and neighborhoods, are likely to be suspected as spies for the government. Their situation varies from place to place. In Tikrit, most of the mukhtars have left, as they worked for the regime. In the countryside, they have often held a more ambiguous position and have generally not been bothered as the Islamic State uses them to obtain information on the populace. In Syria, the former fighters of the Free Syrian Army and other insurgent groups are the ones mostly targeted by the Islamic State. In Tell Abyad,

during the takeover of the city by Daesh, they made an announcement stating that during one month, they had their door open for *tawba*, repentance. The repented must do some kind of Islamic reformatory course. In order to return to the territories held by Daesh, someone local, known and recognized by Daesh, must be the guarantor. If the repentant betrays again, the guarantor is held responsible. Then, the repentant must check in every week, in what they call “repentant meetings” (*Ijtima al-Taebiin*). This is for surveillance purposes, but also to indoctrinate them. During approximately one year, they cannot leave the town.³⁴

Finally, non-Sunnis are condemned to death, exile, or brutal marginalization, increasing sectarian tensions and the territorialization of communities. The execution of Alawite prisoners and Kurdish opponents in Syria and the deadly acts against Shiites, Christians, and Yazidis in Iraq

³³ I-16 with IDPs of Nineveh Governorate and Debag. 28 Jan. 2015.

³⁴ I-42 with an IDP of Tal Abyad. Skype interview. 23 Mar. 2015.

contribute to the formation of the body politic. This brutality has accelerated population movement. In Syria, Christians, Kurds, and Alawites have fled in the face of the Islamic State's territorial conquests. In Iraq, the emergence of the Islamic State has led to millions displaced.³⁵ The Christians from Mosul and the Yazidis from Sinjar have left for the Kurdish regions, and even for overseas. The mixed areas are rapidly disappearing; the Shiites have left Tal Afar, Tikrit, and Mosul to resettle south of Ramadi and north of Baghdad, where the Sunnis have been displaced.

The repression varies by community. The Shiites and the Alawites are executed more or less without exception, as they are considered heretics (*kafir*) and apostates (*murtad*)—that is, as having forsaken Islam. In summer 2014, the Islamic State slaughtered hundreds of Shiite soldiers, altering the videos of the executions to make them appear even more brutal. In addition, the Islamic State has destroyed sacred Shiite sites, notably the tomb of Uwais al-Qarani, a place of Shiite pilgrimage, and tombs dating from the seventh century.³⁶ Furthermore, the Yazidis, who are not among the People of the Book (*Ahl al-Kitab*), are considered polytheist. Consequently, the men are asked to convert and are executed if they refuse. Hundreds have been slaughtered in Kocho, Qiniya, and Jdali, in the Sinjar (Iraq). Approximately 5,000 were forced to convert in the villages near Tal Afar (Amnesty International 2014). Moreover, the Islamic State has enslaved and sold about 3,000 Yazidi girls and women ages 10 to 35. Considered spoils of war (*al-Ghana'im al-harbiyyah* is the Koranic term), fourth-fifths of them were shared among the fighters and the last fifth was accorded to the Islamic State. Some of them were sold publicly in the markets of Raqqah and Mosul; others were detained, raped, and resold by the fighters.³⁷

Finally, the Christians. In principle they are tolerated as *dhimmi*, but under increasingly difficult conditions: high taxation, forced conversions for certain Assyrians,³⁸ and destruction of churches

³⁵ See the UNHCR Iraq data, <http://www.unhcr.org/pages/49e486426.html#>.

³⁶ "Shiite shrine bombed by ISIL in Syria's Raqqa," *ARA News*. 16 May 2014. <http://aranews.net/2014/05/shiite-shrine-bombed-by-isil-in-syrias-raqqa/>. United Nations, "Report of the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic." 14 Nov. 2014. <http://watchlist.org/wordpress/wp-content/uploads/HRC-CRP-ISIS-14-11-2014-FINAL.pdf>, p. 6.

³⁷ I-28, with Viyan Dakheel, Yazidi deputy at Iraqi Parliament. Erbil. 5 Mar. 2015. See also: Amnesty International. "Escape from Hell—Torture, Sexual Slavery in Islamic State Captivity in Iraq." Dec. 2014, https://www.es.amnesty.org/uploads/media/Escape_from_hell_-_Torture_and_sexual_slavery_in_Islamic_State_captivity_in_Iraq_-_English.pdf; United Nations. "Report of the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic." 14 Nov. 2014. http://www.obcbr.org/Documents/HRBodies/HRCouncil/ColSyria/HRC_CRP_ISIS_14Nov2014.pdf; the Islamic State boasts about these events in its monthly magazine: "The failed Crusade." *Dabiq*, issue 4. <http://media.clarionproject.org/files/islamic-state/islamic-state-isis-magazine-Issue-4-the-failed-crusade.pdf>.

³⁸ <http://www.unhcr.org/cgi-bin/texis/vtx/page?page=49e486426&submit=GO#>, accessed 26 May 2015.

(the transformation of the al-Shuhada Armenian Orthodox church of Raqqah into a center for Islamic preaching; the destruction of the Armenian church of Deir-ez-Zor in September 2014). The Christians who go into exile have their possessions confiscated by the Islamic State. Those who remain, notably in Raqqah, where one of the three churches remained open in mid-2015, or in Mosul, pay a protection tax (*jizya*).

3b. An Individualized Political Relationship

The Islamic State creates a direct relationship between individuals and the political authorities, to the detriment of existing intermediaries. Individualism is part of the ideological and doctrinal discourse of the Islamic State, which emphasizes the direct relationship of each person with God. This appeals to some people in the Muslim world and in the West, as they find through involvement with the Islamic State an opportunity for self-fulfillment. Thomas Pierret and Mériam Cheikh analyzed, for instance, the account of a Syrian woman who joined the Islamic State and shared her sense of accomplishment on social networks (2015). Furthermore, elections are considered to be non-Islamic, and the population does not have access to other representatives (notables, imams, tribal leaders) who could relay their claims. For example, in Alam, “the notables of the city have all left, and the Islamic State takes over their land and their property and employs agricultural workers to farm the fields.”³⁹ Similarly, all of our interviewees from tribal and rural regions have emphasized the fact that the Islamic State does not recognize the tribes, which were already weakened by the Ba’athist regimes, as interlocutors.⁴⁰ The movement recognizes only individuals, who are personally responsible in the eyes of the caliphate's authorities. “You have to go to the Islamic State as an individual,” explains a young man from the area of Miqdadiya.⁴¹ Similarly, a Sunni Arab from near Mosul tells us that “The contacts with the Islamic State happen in an individual way. It is impossible to negotiate collectively. At the most, an older member of the family can represent a person, but this is generally not accepted by the Islamic State.”⁴²

In the governorates of Raqqah, Deir Ez-Zor, and Al-Hasaka in Syria, and Al-Anbar in Iraq, the tribes have shown sporadic opposition to the Islamic State. Hundreds of members of the Al-Shaitat tribe in Al-Muhasan (Deir Ez-Zor) were massacred in August 2014, as a consequence of a

³⁹ I-15, with an IDP of Alam, Kirkuk. Jan. 2015.

⁴⁰ I-3, with a tribal elite of Hawija, Hawija. 20 May 2013; I-9, with an Arab Sunni tribal leader of Kirkuk. 6 Apr. 2012.

⁴¹ I-23, with an Arab Sunni IDP from Moqdadiya, Khanaqin.. 31 Jan. 2015.

⁴² I-18, with an Arab Sunni IDP of Niniv Province, Debaga. 29 Jan. 2015.

disagreement on the appropriation of local oil. However, the Islamic State is careful not to fall into generalized tribal conflict. The repression was delegated to Islamic State fighters belonging to the targeted tribe, as part of a strategy to break down the tribes by dividing their members. Before January 2014 for Syria and August 2014 for Iraq, as long as its grip remained precarious, the Islamic State had to compromise with tribes that were strong locally. Moreover, there is a Ministry for Tribal Affairs in Raqqah, with departments in every governorate, which demonstrates a concern for the tribal factor, but the tactic remains one of avoidance, and of weakening tribes, especially as Sharia law strongly opposes many tribal practices. An inhabitant from Raqqah testifies to this strategy of tribe dissolution.

At first, Daesh created ties with each tribe. They would take a member of each tribe that had joined the organization and would give him a lot of power (money, weapons, car, string-pulling), so that he could impose himself within his tribe and serve as the link to the organization by guaranteeing its support, or at least its docility. At that time, the Islamic State invited the sheikh of the tribes, the militants would send gifts when an elder died, they would organize large meals. But this was before the seizing of Raqqah. Since then, the Islamic State fighters no longer care; they feel invincible. Thus, between April 2013 and the takeover by Daesh in January 2014, the most important bureau was the Bureau of Communication with the Tribes [Makteb al-Itissal lil Ashaer]. The person in charge of that bureau was an Iraqi who knew the conflicts and the histories between the clans very well. And because he is not from here, he was not perceived as being in favor of this or that clan. Now, this Bureau has no purpose, apart from gathering intelligence to prevent the tribes from organizing themselves against the Islamic State.⁴³

The Islamic State manipulates the imams. Since mosques are one of the only places where people are allowed to assemble, they are central to the Islamic State's government, enabling a homogenization of the discourse. Its control of the mosques allows the Islamic State, notably during the Friday prayers, to communicate its orders or recommendations through posters and through the Friday *khutbah* (sermon). The Islamic State requires full obedience from the imams, under penalty of death, but, unlike the Taliban, it does not fully integrate them into its administration. "In my village [around Gwer], 15 imams accepted the Islamic State as the

⁴³ I-45, with an inhabitant of Raqqah. Skype interview. 27 Feb. 2015.

legitimate authority; five refused and were executed. In another village, the Islamic State murdered one of the imams, and the inhabitants had to get the body from the hospital; he had been executed with a bullet in his head.”⁴⁴

3c. Moral Order

Unlike the Afghan Taliban and the Somali al-Shabaab movement, the Islamic State requires individuals to actively support the revolutionary process. The “authentic” believer is morally regenerated by fulfilling his scriptural obligations (prayers, respect of Koranic rules), but also by committing to Jihad, which becomes de facto an obligatory duty. Thus, military conscription, Islamic education, and moral order reinforce one another in building a new society. The production of the body of the fighter, but also of the Sunni who has pledge allegiance, happens through the imposition of a style of dress and the modes of comportment that install a bodily *hexis*.

By imposing a moral code, the Islamic State is redefining individual behavior, private and public space, and gender relations. Accounts by Sunnis who have lived under the caliphate, and written sources available elsewhere, provide a coherent picture. The Regulation Bureau (*Diwan al-Hisba*), a religious police, enforces respect for the law and Islamic mores similar to the *mohtaseb* (inquisitors) of the Taliban regime or the *muttawwa* (religious police) of Saudi Arabia. The name is a reference to the moral police initially implemented by the caliph Omar to insure respect for his prerogatives according to the Koran: “He who commands the good and forbids the evil.” A female police force, the al-Khansaa brigade, is the counterpart of the Regulation Bureau.⁴⁵ Patrolling on foot or in cars bearing their insignias, the Regulation Bureau is often the only Islamic State presence in the villages.

The men of the Hisba walk around the streets and say, “You are not well dressed. It’s okay for this time, but be careful the next time.” Or, “You should take this poster down from your shop, or you will risk this or that punishment.” Once we know that something is forbidden, we tell our friend and neighbors, “Be careful, now they forbid to do this.” There always are things considered as contrary to

⁴⁴ I-30, with IDPs of Nineveh Province, Debaga. 6 Feb. 2015.

⁴⁵ “Women of the Islamic State, A Manifesto on Women by the Al-Khansaa Brigade,” translated by the Quilliam Foundation. Feb. 2015, <http://www.quilliamfoundation.org/wp/wp-content/uploads/publications/free/women-of-the-islamic-state3.pdf>

religion, but sometimes we do not know whether it is only advised not to do something or whether it is really forbidden. But when they start the repression, it's known very quickly.⁴⁶

A first set of rules normalizes physical appearance, with particular severity toward women. The men must not shave their beards, though we came across a few exceptions. Short beards, which recall the Muslim Brotherhood, are also banned. The use of razors with blades is forbidden; only electric razors are allowed. Styled cuts for beards and hair, very popular in Iraq and Syria, are prohibited. People who break the rules are flogged in public, and the strikes are made with a full arm: 20 lashes for not respecting the rules and 40 for a styled cut. The barbers are held responsible for the haircuts of their customers, and some of them have been beaten publicly. Their shop hours are regulated; they are closely watched by the Regulation Bureau. Jeans and sneakers are often banned, as well as clothes with Western writing or images, but sweatpants are tolerated instead of a *djellaba* (traditional dress). A man cannot wear any makeup other than kohl, and the only approved perfume is musk (mentioned in the Koran).

Women must wear a headscarf, leaving only the eyes uncovered. Furthermore, in Raqqah, the Diwan al-Hisba demands the wearing of a “shield,” a thick piece of fabric that hides the body from head to toe; penalty for disobeying is 100 lashes and a \$150 fine.⁴⁷ Women can leave the house only accompanied by a *mabram* (a brother, father, husband, or son). Wearing pants, makeup, or any other form of ornament is banned. In such situations, women are not subject to the law; and when they are found guilty, their husbands are punished instead.

Smoking is forbidden, which is particularly problematic in Syria and Iraq, where it is common. The first infraction often results in a warning, and sometimes a fine or a few slaps on the face. A second infraction can lead to a \$300 fine and the breaking, or even amputation, of two fingers. Television and music are banned, but in practice people have them in their homes, despite the danger of getting caught. At checkpoints, the Islamic State fighters examine phones to see whether they contain music or photos, notably of women. Offending phones are confiscated, and their owners fined or flogged. Even musical ringtones are not allowed. In cities, the Islamic State closes down all cafes, shops, and other places of sociability.

⁴⁶ Interview I-42 with an IDP of Tell Abyad. Skype interview. 23 Mar. 2015.

⁴⁷ Abu Ibrahim Raqqawi. “Prisoners in Their Own City: ISIS Bans Women Under 45 from Leaving Raqqah.” *Raqqah News*, 20 Jan. 2015, <http://www.raqqah-sl.com/en/?p=332>

Attendance at Friday prayers is compulsory for all, but the Islamic State focuses its attention on specific groups. Shopkeepers, for instance, must close down during prayer (as in several Gulf countries and under the Taliban regime), and the Regulation Bureau checks 15 minutes before prayer time to be sure they do. However, inhabitants say that they can walk past a mosque during the prayers, not enter, and not be hassled. Finally, the destruction of tombs and other places where the cult of saints is popularly practiced illustrates the distance between the organization and the population.

Raising a new generation in an “authentically” Muslim society is a priority for the movement. School programs have been modified.⁴⁸ Certain subjects—including English, history, geography, and the natural sciences—have been banned. At the University of Mosul, the humanities and social and natural sciences were banned, before it was shut down altogether. The University of Tikrit has also closed down. Instead, adults and children are invited to study Islam at preaching centers.

The ultimate goal of the Islamic moral order and its education system is to mobilize citizens toward Jihad. Until December 2014, recruitment took place through persuasion and pressure on families. After that, young people who refused to join the Islamic State were occasionally executed, and the movement was accused of kidnaping children and teenagers. In addition, the Islamic State recruits some children, teaches them how to fight, and, in certain cases, transforms them into militants. “Daesh recruits the children off the streets and in the orphanages and sends them to training camps. Many teenagers rebelling against their parents have joined Daesh. I even met a father who supplied his son with drugs, as the latter threatened to join Daesh if he didn't.”⁴⁹ Confronted with Western bombings and pressure from the Iraqi Shiite militias in the South and the Kurdish Peshmergas in the North, the Islamic State has implemented mandatory conscription. Since December 2014, each family with more than three sons has to send the additional ones to fight, though the implementation seems to vary from one place to another.

The Islamic State has met with resistance from within the territories under its control, as the unstable military situation and the Islamic State’s limited means prohibit an extensive monitoring of the population. Testimonies show that it is possible to negotiate with the Islamic State’s low-

⁴⁸ Ali Mamuri. “Islamic State Imposes New Rules on Education in Syria.” Iraq: *Al Monitor*, 21 Oct. 2014. <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2014/10/islamic-state-impose-education-program-iraq-syria.html#>.

⁴⁹ I-45 with IDP from Raqqah. Skype interview. 27 Feb. 2015.

ranking militants: “We negotiate with them through personal connections. If we know someone, we can negotiate, but very few people know people from the Security Office, so we try to negotiate at the lowest level of the hierarchy.”⁵⁰ Furthermore, the instability of the political situation and the inability of the Islamic State to seal its borders slow down the naturalization of the regime. It would thus be wrong to consider the population as solely passive. For most individuals, resistance is limited to accommodations, escapism and multiple bypasses. “At people’s houses, life has not changed. We continue to smoke [at home], and those who did not pray previously stay at home during the prayer and continue not praying. There is even still drugs and alcohol.” However, there have been sporadic attacks (terrorist attacks, assassinations) in Raqqah and Mosul.⁵¹ In this regard, the situation is different in Syria from in Iraq. In Iraq, fear of the regime (de facto Shia) limits defection, while other Sunni armed movements exist in Syria outside of the Islamic State.

4. Misperceptions and Messianism

The Islamic State’s decisions do not make sense unless we consider its regime of truth. The eschatology allows us to re-interpret defeats as announcements of the final victory (battle of Dabiq). The reduction of cognitive dissonance, then, produces a threat-driven misperception of the strategic situation (Jervis 1978). Although the logic of total war pursued by the Islamic State is irrational militaristically, it does trap the Sunni population. Indeed, this radicalism constrains the fighters to remain united and, most importantly, participate in the exacerbation of sectarian and ethnic divides, as the Sunni Arab population is generally stigmatized as pro-Islamic State. “The Islamic State has transformed Iraq into a country where the Kurds and the Shiites fight the Sunnis. The latter have no other choice than to be repressed by Baghdad or pledge allegiance to the Islamic State.”⁵²

This international strategy stems from two elements. On the one hand, the movement perceives the international environment as ontologically hostile; hence the pre-emptive attacks that anticipate aggressions to come. In this perspective, the Islamic State rejects international norms on two key points: citizenship and territory. By denying the border and citizenship principles, the Islamic State rejects all form of inclusion in the international order as it was constituted in the

⁵⁰ I-42, with an inhabitant of Tell Abya., Skype interview. 23 Mar. 2015.

⁵¹ I-52, with a person in charge of the Kurdish security forces in Mosul, Dohuk. 10 May 2015; I-53, with a member of the Revolutionary Katiba of Raqqah. Skype interview. 16 Jun. 2015.

⁵² I-55, with a Sunni Arab notable. Kirkuk. 24 Mar. 2015.

nineteenth and twentieth centuries. By doing so, it establishes a perpetual war against all states, in particular the Western and Muslim states, including the Sunni ones. On the other hand, the Islamic State also aims at reunifying under its exclusive authority all Jihadist movements; hence its attacks—rhetorical and militaristic—on other movements, such as the Taliban and al-Qaeda.

4a. The Rejection of the International Order

Even beyond the very nature of its regime, the Islamic State applies a conception of sovereignty that forbids its integration into the international system. Although the stability of international borders is an essential foundation of interstate relations since 1945, the Islamic State denies all legitimacy to existing states, and thus to the international order. Indeed, the borders of the caliphate are only temporarily stabilized, depending on military power balances. Thus, the current conquests represent a step in the expansion of the caliphate. In his proclamation, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi declared that, “The legality of all emirates, groups, states and organisations becomes null by the expansion of the caliph's authority and the arrival of its troops to their areas.” He adds,

So rush O Muslims and gather around your Khalifah, so that you may return as you once were for ages, kings of the earth and knights of war. Come so that you may be honoured and esteemed, living as masters with dignity. Know that we fight over a religion that Allah promised to support. We fight for an Umma to which Allah has given honour, esteem, and leadership, promising it with empowerment and strength on the earth. Come O Muslims to your honour, to your victory. By Allah, if you disbelieve in democracy, secularism, nationalism, as well as all the other garbage and ideas from the west, and rush to your religion and creed, then by Allah, you will own the earth, and the east and west will submit to you. This is the promise of Allah to you. This is the promise of Allah to you.⁵³

This perspective recalls the classical distinction between the Dar al-Islam (Land of Islam), where Islamic law applies, and the Dar al-Harb (Land of War), which is open to conquest and proselytizing. In particular, the Islamic State refuses all legitimacy to international institutions

⁵³ The speech has been transcribed in a document titled “The Promise of Allah” and distributed on the Internet via social networks. Abu Muhammad al-'Adnani al-Shami. "This is the Promise of Allah." *Al-Hayat Media Center*. 19 Jun. 2014. https://ia902505.us.archive.org/28/items/poa_25984/EN.pdf.

and international laws (humanitarian laws, for example). The dissimilarity to the Taliban is flagrant, as the latter aimed for recognition as a legitimate state by claiming a seat at the United Nations and by sometimes cooperating with the International Committee of the Red Cross, UN agencies, and certain NGOs, both when in power in Kabul (1996–2001) and as an insurgency (post–2001).

The enmity of the Islamic State against all states in the region carries an enormous strategic cost. Its policy of all-out attack has deprived it of any support and has even led certain of those states to undertake military operations. The Islamic State, the only Sunni movement that has confronted the governments of both Baghdad and Damascus (and thus Iran), would potentially have benefited from the support, or at least tolerance, of the Sunni states of the region, or even the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG). Before the fall of Mosul, the KRG had indeed supported several Sunni insurgent movements to counterbalance the Shiitization of power in Baghdad. “Between June and August 2015, there were many exchanges, notably economic, between the Islamic State and certain Kurds from the KDP [Kurdish Democratic Party],” explains a Sunni Arab former official from Mosul. “At that moment, the KDP thought it could cohabitate with the Islamic State, which would have allowed it to weaken Baghdad. But the Islamic State decided to attack Erbil (capital city of Iraqi Kurdistan) and was so close to succeeding that it led to an immediate response from the International Coalition.”⁵⁴ Similarly, the Gulf States, led by Saudi Arabia, have never accepted the Iranian influence in Iraq, and the fear of the formation of a Shiite crescent is at the core of these states’ policies. However, the Islamic State has not endeavoured to capitalize on these oppositions, which could have provided it with enough support to face Baghdad and Damascus.

4b. The Constitution of a Jihadist International

The international Jihadism of the Islamic State marks a break from previous movements. Differing from al-Qaeda, its principle mode of action is not the use of terrorist attacks. There is also a regular army, with beginnings of conscription in winter 2014–2015. The valuing of territory goes hand in hand with a hegemonic claim over the Jihadist movement as a whole.

⁵⁴ I-61, with a former member of the bureau of the Council of the Mosul governorate. Erbil, 27 Mar. 2015.

The genealogy of the Islamic State explains its competition with al-Qaeda. Indeed, during the war in Iraq in the mid-2000s, the Islamic State was initially a local branch called Al-Qaeda in Mesopotamia (AQM). Fighting against the American army, the movement, initially led by Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, ended up developing a guerrilla strategy involving a certain degree of territorial control and turning the Shiites into the principal enemy. These two innovations triggered a significant transformation of the Jihadist project. First, as early as the 1990s, the question of territorial control was a source of tension between Osama Bin Laden and his Sudanese and, later, Afghan supporters.⁵⁵ Certain local branches had already started consolidating their territorial control, notably in Yemen and Somalia, but none had yet pushed this logic to its furthest extent (McCant 2012). In its fight against the American occupation, AQM fostered a strategy of territorial control based on the radicalization of the sectarian divide. Second, in 2004–2005, AQM made the Shiites its main target, whereas Al-Qaeda had until then prioritized its focus on the West. The principal branch of Al-Qaeda rejected this evolution, and Ayman al-Zawahiri reminded Abu Musab al-Zarqawi in a 2005 letter that the main enemy was the West, and that anti-Shiite attacks could be misunderstood by Muslims, and thus be counterproductive.⁵⁶ In 2011, the defeat of AQM because of its indiscriminate violence and its refusal to take into account social demands ended the debate for a few years.

After the American withdrawal from Iraq in 2011, the anti-Sunni policy of Iraqi Prime Minister Noor al-Maliki weakened his political opposition and enabled the resurrection of the Al-Qaeda branch under the name of the Islamic State in Iraq. At the same time, the Syrian civil war allowed it to spread. The violent repression by Bashar al-Assad of a peaceful protest movement has indeed provoked an insurgency, which has progressively fragmented and radicalized (Baczko, Dorransoro, and Quesnay 2013). Under the name of Jabhat al-Nusra, the Islamic State in Iraq created a Syrian branch in 2012. The organization was officially attached to Al-Qaeda, but in practice most of the cadres came from the Islamic State in Iraq. In 2013, the latter demanded the fusion of both movements under the name of the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant. Some fighters refused to join the movement, remaining directly affiliated with Al-Qaeda and keeping the name Jabhat al-Nusra. The latter has come to comprise primarily Syrian recruits, who actively participate in the struggle against Damascus in cooperation with the rest of the insurgency. Furthermore, the Islamic State has been in open war against the Syrian insurgency

⁵⁵ In 2004, a book was published by an Al-Qaeda militant promoting a strategy similar to that of the Islamic State, see Abu (Bakr Naji 2004).

⁵⁶ Zawahiri's Letter to Zarqawi. *Combating Terrorism Center*. 2005. <https://www.ctc.usma.edu/posts/zawahiris-letter-to-zarqawi-original-language-2>.

since January 2014 and has avoided confrontation with the forces of Damascus, which are harder to overcome, up through mid-2015.

This factional division corresponds to a fundamental strategic divergence. On the one hand, Al-Qaeda promotes a model of de-territorialized transnational militants, with the West as their first enemy; on the other, the Islamic State seeks to build a Sunni caliphate at the expense of the neighboring regimes and armed groups. In January 2014, after long maneuvers to weaken the Syrian insurgents in the north and the east of Syria, the Islamic State took over the majority of the provinces of Raqqah, Deir ez-Zor, and Al-Hasakah. Then, in August 2014, the Islamic State used the fall of Mosul to eliminate all other groups, Islamist or not (Jaysh Rijal al-Tariqa al-Naqshbandia, Jaysh al-Mujahidin, Ansar al-Sunna/Islam), and gained a monopoly on the representation of Sunnis in Iraq. In Syria, the Islamic State is still competing with the Free Syrian Army, Jabhat al-Nusra, and other groups in Aleppo, Hama, and the south of the country. Furthermore, the Islamic State has also been very critical of the Taliban in the movement's journal, *Dabiq*. It is an important issue, as Mullah Omar also claims the title Commander of the Believers (*Amir al-Muminin*), which puts him in competition with Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi. However, the heart of the disagreement here is the conflict between a national Jihad embedded in internationally recognized borders and a transnational, global Jihad. While the Taliban are seeking to negotiate with the Kabul government and the United States, the opposition with the Islamic State is absolute.

The allegiance of movements outside of the region to the Islamic States came from multiple directions. The Islamic State proclaimed governorates (*Wilayat*) in November 2014 in Libya (Tripolitania, Cyrenaic, Fezzan), Algeria, Egypt (Sinai), Yemen, and Saudi Arabia.⁵⁷ Three months later, another governorate was announced in Afghanistan and Pakistan under the name of Wilayat Khorasan.⁵⁸ The rallying of Boko Haram in March 2015 shows the reality of a dynamic that relies heavily on the media presence of the Islamic State. Moreover, the movement's presence is limited in Saudi Arabia; it remains weak in Yemen because of the competition with al-Qaida in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP), which implemented an emirate in

⁵⁷ Rita Katz. "Interactive Map: The Islamic State's Global Network of Pledged and Supporting Groups." *Insite Blog*. 17 Feb. 2015. <http://news.siteintelgroup.com/blog/index.php/entry/360-interactive-map-the-islamic-state%E2%80%99s-global-network-of-pledged-and-supporting-groups>.

⁵⁸ Adam Withnall. "Syria, Iraq... and now Afghanistan: Isis Advance Enters Helmand Province for the First Time, Afghan Officials Confirm." *The Independent*. 13 Jan. 2015. <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/middle-east/syria-iraq-and-now-afghanistan-isis-advance-enters-helmand-province-for-the-first-time-afghan-officials-confirm-9974304.html>.

Abya in 2011–2012, and in Afghanistan and Pakistan because of the competition with the Taliban. Finally, the rallying of individuals in Western countries does not seem to announce the constitution of locally significant movements because of the lack of a social base.

How useful is this transnational network for the Islamic State? The arrival of fighters from other countries is an asset on two levels. First, some of them are educated and can serve as cadres. Second, these militants are from elsewhere, which reinforces the separation between the movement and the population. However, this is actually counterproductive for the movement. The terrorist attacks do not really enable the transformation of the international power balance. The Western reaction to these attacks has always been to reinforce the fight against the Islamic State, which is an important hurdle for the military functioning of the movement. Moreover, the movements that *have* sworn allegiance to the Islamic State are not capable of offering significant support militarily or politically.

5. Conclusion

To various degrees, other political movements exhibit features similar to those of the Islamic State. The Cambodian Khmer Rouge shares the same closure and violence. To a lesser extent, armed groups such as the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam of Sri Lanka, the Kurdish PKK (Kurdish Working Party), and the Peruvian Shining Path are also characterized by a militarized and violent organization. The striking uniqueness of the Islamic State lies in its eschatological ideology, which fuels a permanent state of war.

These structural traits make its survival in Iraq and Syria unlikely. Its all-out aggressive strategy leads to a more cohesive international coalition, resulting in an intensification of its military operations. The symbolic effect of terrorist attacks (France, United States, Gulf States, Egypt, Tunisia) has created a ratchet effect that forbids the establishment of a *modus vivendi* between the Islamic State and the rest of the world. Its obliteration as a territorial entity in Iraq and, a longer perspective, in Syria is all the more likely as its internal dynamic prevents strategic shifts. Deliberations are impossible due to the hierarchy and the elimination of internal dissidence. Moreover, a compromising stance toward the outside world would weaken the charisma of the movement and would shake the ethic of conviction of the militants, resulting in massive defections. Yet the defeat of the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria would not necessarily translate

into the end of the caliphate project, which could re-emerge in other war-torn countries such as Afghanistan, Yemen, and Libya.

Finally, it is important to situate the Islamic State in the larger context of increasing sectarianism in Middle Eastern politics. In Syria since 2011 and Iraq since 2003, ethno-religious cleansing has become generalized, the Islamic State being its most extreme version. Hence, its emergence and its strategy of territorial control are largely an effect of the marginalization of the Sunnis in Iraq. In return, the policy of the Islamic State accelerates the domination of Shia over the Iraqi regime and reorganizes the regional and international alliances, favoring Iran and destabilizing the Sunni countries, beginning with the Gulf countries and Turkey. Paradoxically, the Islamic State has been instrumental in the reconstitution of a central state in Iraq around the Shiite majority. The emergence of the Islamic State, self-proclaimed champion of the humiliated Sunnis, leaves as its main legacy the potentially definitive marginalization of Sunnis in Iraq.

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