

PERSPECTIVES: AN OPEN INTRODUCTION TO CULTURAL ANTHROPOLOGY

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Political Anthropology Case Study

ISIS or the Islamic State: A State in Formation?

Around the beginning of 2014, a new state arguably began to form as the Islamic State of Iraq (ISI) metamorphosed into the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) and then to simply the Islamic State (IS) (In the following discussion, I use the terms ISIS and Islamic State interchangeably.). Though it may be controversial to claim that ISIS has achieved formal political organization as a state, many of the elements that characterize a state-level organization apply. ISIS has an armed force that has initially proven successful in one battle after another, resources and revenue (however ill-gotten its money and assets such as oil may be), an administrative structure, a body of law, and its own banking system and currency. Despite recent losses of territory, its operations have been extended well beyond the boundaries of Iraq and Syria, and territorial control is not the only measure of its influence. From this perspective, the Islamic State is of value for testing our definitions of a state and assessing the extent to which the characteristics of a state described here apply to this new political formation.

Though few people worldwide approve ISIS's activities or ideology, the damage the group has unleashed is not necessarily inconsistent with a new state in formation. Few, if any, states were conceived without violence in one form or another. The United States was formed by theft of land from indigenous people, a revolutionary war, and the kidnapping and sale of entire populations from the region we now know as West Africa into slavery. Most of the founders were slave

owners and many, such as George Washington, obtained their wealth from speculating on stolen land. This history was replicated in Canada and Australia and, earlier, in the Near East and China. All states, at some point, have perpetrated what today are defined as crimes. We should think carefully when considering the Islamic State as an exception to the historical pattern.

The Islamic State, if it is indeed a state, came into being following the American invasion of Iraq. The process began with the Gulf War in 1991 in which Iraq invaded Kuwait and was expelled by an alliance led by the United States. Then, in March 2003, the George W. Bush administration chose to invade Iraq, deposing the regime of Saddam Hussein the following month and occupying the country; U.S. troops finally withdrew in 2011. Some consider the outcome of the decision to invade and occupy Iraq a worst-case blowback to a military action—the unintended negative consequence of waging war against a Third World country creating a Frankenstein’s monster known as ISIS, the Islamic State, the Islamic Caliphate, and a host of other names.

ISIS is a theocracy organized as a self-styled caliphate that formally came into being on June 29, 2014, the first day of the holy month of Ramadan. Kidnapped journalists were beheaded, the so-called apostates were crucified, and the second city of Iraq, Mosul, fell to a rag-tag group of fighters numbering fewer than 1,500. The Caliphate of Ibrahim in the person of Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi came to be known around the world.¹

1. See, for instance, an end-times interpretation of ISIS by William McCants, *The ISIS Apocalypse: The History, Strategy, and Doomsday Vision of the Islamic State* (New York: St. Martins, 2015); a backgrounder on the crises by Patrick Cockburn, *Jihadis and the West in the Struggle for the Middle East* (New York: OR Books, 2016); an

What is the Islamic State? Loretta Napoleoni (2014) offers a concise definition differentiating it from other terrorist and Al Qaeda inspired movements:

Where IS [the Islamic State] does outmatch past armed organizations is in military prowess, media manipulation, social programs, and, above all, nation building . . . These enhancements spring from the ability of the Islamic State to adapt to a fast-changing, post-Cold-War environment.²

In short, the Islamic State began not with advanced weaponry—it has no navy, no air force, no nuclear missiles—but with the latest communication technology along with the techniques of persuasion via the internet it attempts to create a nation-state based on the Salafist model of the four caliphs who succeeded the prophet Muhammad in the late seventh century, which is based on strict interpretation of the Qu’ran.³

So, is ISIS a state in formation?⁴ First of all, as Abdel Bari Atwan and Malcolm Nance both point out, ISIS is well organized and staffed by numerous experienced military officials. Many, if not most, are former Iraqi Ba’athist administrators who were fired after Saddam Hussein was toppled in late April 2003.⁵ Second, ISIS has established

update by Patrick Cockburn that details ISIS’s role in the crisis, *Age of Jihad: The Islamic State and the Great War for the Middle East* (London: Verso, 2016); and a comprehensive text on ISIS by Malcolm Nance, *Defeating Isis: Who They Are, How They Fight, What They Believe* (New York: Skyhorse Press, 2016).

2. Loretta Napoleoni, *The Islamic Phoenix: The Islamic State and the Redrawing of the Middle East*. (New York: Seven Stories Press, 2014), 3.
3. Ibid.
4. For this initial analysis, the ethnographic present is the time period from July 2014 to February 2015.
5. Malcolm Nance, *Defeating Isis: Who They Are, How They Fight, What They Believe* (New York: Skyhorse Press, 2016). Abdel Bari Atwan,

a banking system based in Mosul with its own currency of gold, silver, and copper coins. Third, it is well-financed; its assets range from oil to purloined currency, though it has been strapped for cash recently. Fourth, it has a long-term strategy of ethnic cleansing in the hope of creating a unitary population of Sunni believers steeped in the Salafist ideological tradition akin to the Saudis' Wahabi tradition. Fifth, it has a solid strategy for expanding its forces by recruiting foreign fighters from around the world and educating its young people in the ways of Salafist Islam. Based on those facts, I argue that the Islamic State is a state in formation.⁶

Citing the Montevideo Convention of Rights and Duties of States held in 1933, Atwan contends that there are two types of states: declaratory and constitutive. A declaratory entity has a clearly defined territory, a permanent population, and a government capable of controlling the population, its territory, and its resources, and it is recognized by other states. A constitutive state has the same attributes but is not necessarily recognized by other states. ISIS is more like a constitutive state since it is not recognized by any other states.⁷ Napoleoni added the concept of a shell state, which she defined as an "armed organization [that] assembles the socio-economic infrastructure" such as taxation and employment services

Islamic State: The Digital Caliphate (London: Saqi Books, 2015), 132–136 and Malcolm Nance, *Defeating ISIS: Who They Are, How They Fight, What They Believe* (New York: Skyhorse Press, 2016), 28.

6. The information comes from Abdel Bari Atwan, *Islamic State: The Digital Caliphate* (London: Saqi Books, 2015), 132–136 and Malcolm Nance, *Defeating ISIS: Who They Are, How They Fight, What They Believe* (New York: Skyhorse Press, 2016), 28.

7. Abdel Bari Atwan, *Islamic State*, 3–4.

among others of a state “without the political one. i.e., no territory, no self-determination.”⁸

Administrative Apparatus and Functions

The best way to understand ISIS as a formative state is to analyze its administrative apparatus and the functions of its subdivisions. As Atwan and Nance point out, ISIS is highly centralized with the caliph—Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, also known as Ibrahim—as representative and, arguably, a descendant of the prophet Muhammad and so constitutes the ultimate authority of the state.⁹ However, ISIS’s organization is such that if he or any other authority is killed in war, other trained individuals can readily take his place. There are two deputies in each of two senior positions, and they make the final decisions concerning the affairs of ISIS. Reports of the killing of ISIS senior staff members have tended to overlook this arrangement.¹⁰ Decisions are carried out by lower-level deputies in the administration who are allowed discretion in how those orders are implemented, allowing officials to use local knowledge to best execute the directives. These attributes—ready replacement of staff and local decision-making power—provide flexibility to the centralized administrative structure associated with ISIS.¹¹

Baghdadi and his deputies rely on various councils and department committees that form their “cabinet.” The top level of administration also has a powerful Shura (consultative) council that endorses the Sharia (religious

8. Loretta Napoleoni, *The Islamic Phoenix*, 124.

9. Malcolm Nance, *Defeating Isis: Who They Are, How They Fight, What They Believe* (New York: Skyhorse Press, 2016).

10. Abdel Bari Atwan, *Islamic State*, 131–137; Nance, *Defeating Isis*, 50–67.

11. *Ibid.*, 132.

legal) council's choice of caliph and then provides advice to him. The Shura council oversees the affairs of state, manages communication, and issues orders to the chain of command and ensures that they are implemented. The twelve-member Shura council is made up members selected by Baghdadi and is headed by one of the senior deputies.¹²

The Sharia council is charged with formulating regulations and administrative routines consistent with law as spelled out in the Qu'ran and with selecting the caliphs, who are endorsed by the Shura council. It also oversees all matters related to the administration as a whole and manages the judicial affairs of the body politic. Although the Western press has emphasized the more draconian penalties categorized as *hudd* such as amputations for theft and capital punishment by beheadings and crucifixion, ISIS's legal system also allows judges to impose less-severe *tazeer* punishments designed to publicly shame a miscreant with the aim of reform and rehabilitation. How frequently these two types of enforcement are used is a statistical question that would require a survey that simply cannot be conducted at this time.¹³

What is the relationship of the top administrators and their councils to the regional and local administrative bodies? The story begins with incorporation of those bodies into the state. When a city, town, or administrative unit is first occupied by ISIS forces, the first order of business in addition to maintaining the existing police force is to establish a Sharia police force that aims to work toward the "purity" of the Islamic State. Thus, women are enjoined to wear black robes and to veil and men are likewise ordered to wear modest clothing. The "moral police" are dispatched to

12. Ibid., 132.

13. Ibid., 134.

ensure acceptable behavior and dress, and both the regular and the moral police (the *hisbah*) are outfitted with black uniforms bearing a white Islamic State insignia.¹⁴

Several councils handle the main issues of Islamic State polity and society. The innumerable challenges to the Islamic State's authority are dealt with by the security and intelligence council. Its functions include growing networks throughout the Islamic State and beyond, maintaining border controls, imposing punishments on dissidents, and eliminating borders set by treaties such as the Sykes-Picot agreement of 1916. The military council is charged with defending ISIS's existing borders, expanding into new areas, and incorporating foreign fighters into the ranks.¹⁵ It is also charged with ethnic cleansing of non-Sunni Muslims, Yazidis, Jews, and Christians to ensure a single ethnic group to facilitate effective control even though the Qu'ran explicitly accommodates all "people of the book," which includes all Christians, Jews, and Muslims.¹⁶ Writes Napoleoni:

In particular, cleansing its territory of Shia from its territory offers many advantages for nation-building, gaining support of local Sunni populations, producing a more homogeneous population with fewer opportunities for sectarianism, and freeing up resources to offer fighters the spoils of war.¹⁷

Coordinating with the military council is the Islamic State Institution for Public Information, which is the main source of ISIS information, covering everything from current events to announcements of ISIS polities. Detractors have

14. Ibid., 133.

15. Ibid., 134–135

16. Ibid., and Patrick Cockburn, *Chaos and Caliphate: Jihadis and the West in the Struggle for the Middle East*.

17. Loretta Napoleoni, *The Islamic Phoenix*, 96.

dubbed it the ministry of propaganda. The public information institute conducts outreach via the media and internet to contact potential recruits from abroad as foreign fighters and women as wives of fighters.

ISIS also has an economic council that oversees the wealth it has obtained by taking over oil fields in the region, assimilating local governments and nongovernment banks in regions it has overrun, demanding ransom for captured foreign supporters from allies such as Saudi Arabia (its formal connection has been questioned), and collecting Islamic taxes: *jieya* from non-Muslim residents and *zakat*, taxes that are part of obligatory alms provided for in the Qu'ran, from Muslims who can afford it. The economic council's accounting system consists of an annual budget and monthly reports. Analysts concur that, in Atwan's words, "this level of bureaucratic process and accountability is indicative of a large, well-organized, state-like entity."¹⁸

Finally, to sustain ISIS, the Education Council oversees the provision of education and the curriculum, which promote strict Salafist interpretation of the Qu'ran. Several topics are banned from the curriculum, including the evolutionary model of biology and philosophy. The curriculum includes training in warfare for boys at sixteen years of age and training in domestic skills for girls.¹⁹

The final significant institution under ISIS, the Islamic Service Council, oversees public services such as maintenance of infrastructures—roads, bridges, electricity lines. In towns and cities under its control, the council operates a rationing system for consumer goods and discourages traders from selling to people who do not carry the card with the group's logo on it. Napoleoni argues that

18. Abdel Bari Atwan, *Islamic State*, 135.

19. *Ibid.*

filling potholes, restoring electricity and phone lines, and providing other public services are important components in securing the loyalty of residents of territories overrun by ISIS.

Decline or a Change in Strategy?

Over the past two years, there has been a massive emigration of Syrians and Iraqis out of the region. Why is this occurring? Is the Islamic State in a period of decline or is it adapting its guerilla strategy and tactics. During this period, ISIS lost territory in Iraq and Syria. The city of Sinjar, Syria, fell to the Kurdish Peshmerga army in late 2015, followed by the fall of Tikrit, Anbar, and Fallujah to the Iraqi army early in 2016. The battle for Mosul in Iraq started October 17, 2016, and ISIS has been pursuing a scorched-earth defense, including using residents as human shields. As this chapter was being written, ISIS had been ejected from East Mosul but only after massive property destruction and massacres of its residents by ISIS. Reports from Syria noted that the de facto capital of ISIS, Raqqa in Syria has been subjected to attacks; one of ISIS's supply routes passed through Sinjar. In addition, Aleppo in Syria was destroyed as ISIS competed with other rebel groups and with the Syrian army under Bashar Assad. Aleppo was eventually reclaimed by the Syrian government, but tens of thousands of the city's residents were killed or displaced.

Despite recent setbacks, ISIS has so far retained significant territories in Syria and Iraq and gained control of areas in northern Libya (which it later lost), the Sinai region in Egypt, Afghanistan, Chechnya, Indonesia, and the Philippines. It has established alliances with Boko Haram in West Africa and with other groups in Gaza, Lebanon, and Algeria, and ISIS units have been identified in places as far

away as Brazil and Norway. ISIS attacks have occurred in France—twice in Paris and once in Nice—and in Brussels, Belgium, and future attacks against the United Kingdom, Germany, and Italy have been threatened. ISIS also claimed responsibility for attacks in the United States on a nightclub in Orlando, Florida, a staff party in San Bernardino, California, on students and staff at Ohio State University, and threatened to attack the Macy's Thanksgiving parade, leading to exceptionally tight security there. What ISIS lacks in territory, it makes up for with alliances and operations abroad.

Atwan has noted that ISIS strategists took these potential defeats into account long before they occurred. The military council has generally avoided defending sites ISIS could not hold and concentrated on theatres they could win or defend. These incidents and countless others appear to be part of the so-called Snake in the Rocks strategy cited by Napoleoni, which is similar to the strategy used by China's Mao Zedong, who concentrated his Communist forces in the countryside rather than in cities. Ho Chi Minh used a similar strategy in the Vietnam War against France and the United States.

A cardinal rule of the guerrilla strategy, painfully established by drawn-out conflicts in China, Vietnam, and Cuba, is that one must elicit the support of the people. In this regard, ISIS's imposition of the Salafist/Wahabi model of Islam is proving problematic. Cockburn provides a laundry list of constraints associated with strict Salafist Islam, including prohibitions against wearing jeans and makeup, smoking cigarettes or hubble-bubbles (hookahs), and keeping stores open during times of prayer. Women are required to wear the abaya (black robe) and veil and are not permitted to gather in public places, including stores.

Men must wear beards, and barbers who agree to shave their beards off are punished. The punishments for violating these rules are whipping, amputation of limbs, and beheading.²⁰

Life under ISIS

A cardinal rule of the guerrilla strategy, painfully established by drawn-out conflicts in China, Vietnam, and Cuba, is that one must elicit the support of the people. In this regard, ISIS's imposition of the Salafist/Wahabi model of Islam is proving problematic. Cockburn provides a laundry list of constraints associated with strict Salafist Islam, including prohibitions against wearing jeans and makeup, smoking cigarettes or hubble-bubbles (hookahs), and keeping stores open during times of prayer. Women are required to wear the abaya (black robe) and veil and are not permitted, unless accompanied by a man, to gather in public places, including stores. Men must wear beards, and barbers who agree to shave their beards off are punished. The punishments for violating these rules are whipping, amputation of limbs, and beheading.²¹

Recent accounts on the retaking of Mosul, first in the eastern district and (as of this writing), parts of the western district, report both on the fleeing of hundreds of residents from the city and the discovery of mass graves in and around Mosul. Two recent case studies are provided here.

According to Patrick Cockburn, author of *Chaos and Caliphate*, Hamza is a 33-year-old man from Fallujah, Iraq, who joined ISIS fighters when they took over the city. He

20. Patrick Cockburn, *Chaos and Caliphate*, 397.

21. *Ibid.*

was initially attracted to ISIS because of his religious beliefs. Two months before he was interviewed by Cockburn, however, he defected because he was repulsed by initiation rites in which ISIS fighters killed prisoners, some of whom were people he knew, and the raping of Yazidi women who were forced into sex slavery as what ISIS called “pagans.” When he balked at executing a Sunni prisoner who had worked with the Shia Iraqi government (also called “pagans”), he was not punished; instead, he was also offered sexual services by a Yazidi woman who, as a pagan, was a suitable target for ISIS fighters. The rapes and executions finally compelled him to leave, and after five days (with help from reliable friends), he arrived safely to his destination outside ISIS-controlled territory. Hamza recalled that “At the beginning, I thought they were fighting for Allah, but later I discovered they were far from the principles of Islam...The justice they were calling for when they first arrived in Fallujah turned out to be only words.”²²

New literature has also surfaced that contradicts in part the claims by Napoleoni and Atwan about life in the ISIS-controlled areas of Iraq and Raqqa. The *Raqqa Diaries*, authored by “Samer” and edited by the BBC’s Mike Thomson, shows how daily life is closely monitored in a running diary. Samer himself was sentenced to forty lashes for speaking out against the beheadings, his father was killed in an airstrike of a house next door, and his mother, wounded in the same air raid, was hospitalized. He notes the spiraling high costs of food, the restrictions on purchasing a television set, lest the viewer sees what is going on in the West, and the frequent executions for minor offenses. He reports the stoning to death of a woman. Even the length of a man’s pants is monitored. In the end, Samer escaped

22. Ibid., 382–386.

to northern Syria and contacted the BBC to provide his account.²³

Recent Updates

As of late March 2017, the Iraqi invasion of Mosul has resulted in its control of the eastern district and an attack on western parts of the city. Mass graves have been discovered in and near Mosul, and there is a massive emigration of its residents. Indeed, this emigration of Syrians and Iraqis that has occupied the headlines for the past year is in part the product of the ISIS conflict. Raqqa is under siege and has been bombed for several months, according to recent reports, but remains under ISIS control. In the meantime, in addition to battles in Syria and Iraq, in which ISIS has lost substantial ground—Fallujah, Anbar province, Tikrit—ISIS has resorted to terror attacks, not only in Paris, Nice, Brussels, Orlando, and San Bernardino, but also in other parts of the globe, from Brazil and Norway to Chechnya in Russia, Mindanao in the Philippines, and even in China. In the past two days of this writing, ISIS attacks have elicited Afghanistan's request for U.S. military intervention against not only the Taliban but also the Islamic State. Finally, a stolen minivan driven by Khalid Masood ran over a group of pedestrians in front of the British Parliament on March 22, 2017, the day this text was edited. The ISIS press agency Amaq claimed the Islamic State's responsibility for the attack on March 23; its claim is yet to be verified.

Based on all of this evidence, it is reasonable to conclude that ISIS is well-organized and has at least some of the attributes of a state. Though there have been setbacks, some

23. Samer, *The Raqqa Diaries* (London: Interlink Publishing Group, 2017).

quite extensive, the organization has extended its operations and alliances in territories well outside Syria and Iraq. However, it is also evident that the attempt to impose strict Islamic order is alienating many people despite various incentives for loyalty in ISIS-captured territory. The desire to impose a strict Wahabi-Salafist model of Islam on the populations it conquers could thwart its efforts as those societies are not accustomed to living according to such rules.