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ORIGINAL ARTICLE

The Significance of ISIS's State Building in Syria

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Abstract

Researchers and policy makers appear to hold a deeply rooted reluctance to acknowledge, let alone address, the significance of ISIS's state building. Those who have engaged with this issue have tended to traverse the analytical dead end of legalistic questions and themes, inevitably concluding that ISIS's efforts fell short of the threshold of statehood. This article sharply diverges from this reasoning and instead focuses on the political extent of ISIS's state building, which was a reaction to the collapse of authority in Iraq and Syria, and the concomitant failure to protect peoples at risk. The study examines the Islamic State on four dimensions: the stabilization of society, the extraction of income, the politicization of religion, and the use of sectarian divisions. It finds that ISIS's efforts were internally contradictory and contained a number of elements that impeded its establishing a conventionally defined state and its carrying out of actions expected of such a state.

In August 2015, when ISIS was at the height of its powers, it controlled more than 60 percent of Syria, a land mass the size of the United Kingdom. Its attempt to create an actual "Islamic State" in this territory distinguished it from its predecessors. These efforts brought together local and international fighters, including jihadists and former members of the Baathist state apparatus. ISIS was an insurrectionary actor that sought to achieve "radical political and social change," and its competence in administrative matters came as something of a surprise to external observers.[1]

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[1] Charles Caris and Samuel Reynolds, "ISIS Governance in Syria," Institute for the Study of War, July 2014, https://www.understandingwar.org/report/isis-governance-syria.

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To take one example, its ability to adjust its governance to particular provinces helped ensure that resources were appropriately distributed across more than 13 ministries dispersed across the territory.[2] ISIS, on the model of the state, articulated a clear governing ideology and achieved a high level of social control within a defined geographical area.

Johnston et al., in acknowledging the extent and scope of this development, speak of ISIS's "quasi-stable government" and claim that its public legitimacy was enhanced by "Islamic services" and educational, infrastructural, and judicial practices that were superior to those established elsewhere in the region.[3] This has been questioned by at least one observer, who suggests that the low quality of ISIS's services was actually concealed by early large-scale recruitment and territorial expansion.[4] In its stronghold and de facto capital of Raqqah, ISIS developed and sustained substantial administrative resources.[5] A police force and judicial system functioned alongside "religious auxiliaries" who ensured Islamic codes of conduct were obeyed. Religious-education and social-service providers were established, and extensive oil, water (in Raqqah and Deir ez-Zor), and food (in Al-Hasakah) resources provided a solid base for future state building.[6] In addition, ISIS was able to prevent the emergence of opposition; the efficiency of its counterintelligence ensured its internal arrangements and operations remained shrouded in secrecy.

In acknowledging and engaging these developments, researchers have tended to focus on the legalistic question of statehood. In so doing, they have invariably observed that the "caliphate" lacked a permanent population and a defined territory; its "borders" were not internationally recognized, and its "territory" was fluid and prone to adjust due to the conflict; large-scale population displacement undermined the possibility of a permanent population emerging; and the international community, whose will was expressed in a unanimous UN resolution, rejected ISIS's claim to be a state.[7] In citing these and other considerations, observers have generally reached the same conclusion.[8] Bunzel, for example, suggests the Islamic State was actually a "battlefield command"; Cronin labels it "a pseudo-state led by a conventional army."[9]

In recognizing these debates, we should not preoccupy ourselves with the observation that ISIS possessed three of the crucial prerequisites for statehood: territory, an established population, and a political authority. Instead, we should engage at the level of political utility and resolve to understand the extent to which the caliphate succeeded in achieving key political functions.

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[2] Jennifer Jefferies, "ISIS Administrative and Territorial Organization," Near East and South Asia Centre for Strategic Studies, Washington, 2016, https://www.iemed.org/publication/isis-administrative-and-territorial-organization/.

[3] Patrick Johnston, Jacob Shapiro, Howard Shatz, Benjamin Bahney, Danielle Jung, Patrick Ryan, and Jonathan Wallace, *Foundations of the Islamic State. Management, Money, and Terror in Iraq, 2005–2010* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2016).

[4] Anne Speckhard and Ahmet Yayla, "The ISIS Emni: The Origins and Inner Workings of ISIS's Intelligence Apparatus," *Perspectives on Terrorism* 11, no. 1 (2017): 4.

[5] Alex Bilger, "ISIS Annual Reports Reveal a Metrics-Driven Military Command"," Institute for the Study of War, May 2014," https://www.understandingwar.org/isis-annual-reports-reveal-metrics-driven-military-command.

[6] Caris and Reynolds, "ISIS Governance in Syria."

[7] United Nations Security Council, Resolution 2170, August 15, 2014.

[8] Aymenn Jawad Al-Tamimi, "The Archivist: Unseen Islamic State Financial Accounts for Deir ez-Zor Province," Jihadology.net, October 5, 2016.

[9] Cole Bunzel, "From Paper State to Caliphate: The Ideology of the Islamic State," The Brookings Project on U.S. Relations with the Islamic World, March 2015, 27; Audrey Kurth Cronin, "ISIS Is not a Terrorist Group," *Foreign Affairs* (March–April 2015): 87–98.

This analysis will therefore analyze the sophistication and extent of ISIS's practices. The aim is not to resolve the question of statehood (assuming resolution is even possible), but to provide clearer insight into the extent and significance of ISIS's state building in Syria. Accordingly, the analysis does not focus on the themes and questions raised by legalistic analyses (including the existence or nonexistence of a permanent population and/or international recognition, to take two examples). It instead considers political functions that were part of ISIS's project, including stabilization, resource extraction, and the use of religion and sectarianism for political purposes.

We should acknowledge that there is a more fundamental objection to assessing the question of statehood through legal theory and legal precedent: ISIS never sought recognition on the terms established by the international community. The concept of an "Islamic State" was therefore underpinned from the first instance by an essential anomaly, that ISIS pre-emptively rejected the conventional understanding. Given this, it would not just be counterproductive but actually perverse to assess the existence or nonexistence of a state by, for instance, referring to Article 11 of the Montevideo Convention, which some analysts use to define the state. In citing the convention, observers often assert that a "real state possesses a permanent population, a defined territory and a government able to enter into relations with external states."[10]

Given the historical context, we should acknowledge that ISIS's performance of state-like functions is by no means exceptional, as the precedents of Hamas, Hezbollah, and the Taliban show. In each of these cases, the group augmented its legitimacy and ability to function by meeting public needs that had previously been neglected by a state that was either completely absent or inefficient. Afghanistan is the only case where actual statehood, as opposed to the existence of a de facto state, was involved, though even there it was open to question.

We should not unduly burden ourselves with the insights that the state is "the institution or grouping which possesses the monopoly of legitimate or physical violence over a territory"; a "bordered power container of legitimate violence"; or "a distinct set of institutions that ha[ve] the authority to make the rules [that] govern a society."[11] Similarly, there is no need to commit much time to the observation that the state is "an elaborate institutional structure which delimits, justifies and exercises the claims attached to sovereignty."[12] Hamid offers the important observation that the meaning and significance of ISIS's state building has frequently been misunderstood by external observers, and he is surely correct in suggesting that its graphic and extensive use of violence has created a misconception that its "governance" would necessarily be crude and ineffective.[13] Revlin concurs that "media coverage of the Islamic State frequently refers to the group's violent and seemingly archaic justice system without considering the institutional structures that enable this violence, or the broader function that it serves in the group's ambitious state-building project."[14] The essential contribution of this article is to reassess ISIS's state building and provide a clearer insight into its significance and extent.

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[10] "Convention on Rights and Duties of States (inter-American)," Montevideo Convention, December 26, 1933, https://www.jus.uio.no/english/services/library/treaties/01/1-02/rights-duties-states.xml.

[11] Lowell Barrington, "'Nation' and 'Nationalism': The Misuse of Key Concepts in Political Science," *PS: Political Science and Politics* 30, no. 3 (1997): 712-716; John Scott, *State* in a *Dictionary of Sociology*, fourth edition (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014).

[12] John Breuilly, "Nationalism and the State," in *Nations and Nationalism: A Reader*, ed. Philip Spencer and Howard Wollman (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2005), 61.

[13] Shadi Hamid, "What America Never Understood about ISIS," Brookings Institution, November 2019, https://www.brookings.edu/blog/order-from-chaos/2019/11/01/what-america-never-understood-about-isis/.

[14] Ibid.

STATE FAILURE AND STABILIZATION

The signs of state fragility were already apparent in Syria before the civil war. However, it is essential to distinguish proximate and structural factors creating this fragility while acknowledging the ways in which they interrelated and interacted. President Bashar al-Assad's neoliberal reforms of the early 2000s aggravated pre-existing problems, and they contributed to popular protest. The redistribution of wealth from lower to higher income classes was politically significant, as it alienated the Sunni majority. The gap between a rich minority and the general population increased pressures on the unresponsive political system, as there was increased competition for dwindling public resources, growing social inequality, and an increased number of socioeconomic distortions. Public frustrations were further fueled and exacerbated by ostentatious displays of wealth by senior members of the security establishment and businessmen aligned with the Syrian authorities.[15] Another cumulative factor in the uprising was the devastating drought between 2003 and 2009 that drove thousands of villagers off their lands and into population centers.[16] Uneven and unequal economic growth also had an impact on the society and its health sector, reflected in high levels of unemployment and poverty, particularly among young people.[17]

Providing security in the aftermath of state collapse or failure is one of the most common ways in which armed actors, including terrorist groups, can legitimize their presence. In this sense, the prominence, and even existence, of a quasi-state actor is attributable to an unmet need or requirement. For example, in helping to provide a degree of security, armed groups can stabilize an insecure situation. However, this is overlooked by those who claim that ISIS has now been decisively "defeated." Insofar as states fail to meet essential needs, including the provision of security, it remains likely that alternative providers will emerge and consolidate. It should be remembered that it is far from clear that ISIS has indeed been defeated. Its leadership developed a strategy that would be applied in the event of the caliphate's collapse, and many terrorist attacks have been claimed in Deir ez-Zor by ISIS and ISIS-allied groups since it lost its control of territory.[18] As long as state failure persists, so does the threat of ISIS's re-emergence.[19] ISIS's state building should be viewed and understood in the wider context of state failure; indeed, it should be considered a response to it. From this perspective, state building comes to be understood as an integral part of ISIS's strategy in both Iraq and Syria, and we should bear in mind its importance in assisting key military and strategic interventions.

The lack of focus on the relationship between state failure and terrorism is all the more surprising because the link between governance and terrorism is well established in both the academic and policy fields, as the extensive attention given to questions and themes of state failure quite clearly demonstrates. It is broadly recognized that fragile states are particularly vulnerable to internal and external shocks, as well as domestic and international conflicts.[20] The concept has been widely used by the OECD and the World Bank since the mid-2000s to refer to the poorest and most unstable countries that are unable to meet minimum standards set by major development agencies and aid donors. The concept has also been applied more generally by scholars and analysts to refer to countries where the authority, capacity, and legitimacy of state institutions are dramatically declining, weak, or broken.[21]

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[15] Samer Bakkour, "Daraa and the Altered Trajectory of the Syrian Crisis, *Asian Journal of Middle Eastern and Islamic Studies* 16, no. 2 (2022): 225-242."

[16] Raymond Hinnebusch, "What Went Wrong: Understanding the Trajectory of Syria's Conflict," in *Syria: From National Independence to Proxy War*, ed. Linda Matar and Ali Kadri (London: Palgrave Macmillan, Cham, 2019), 35.

[17] Bakkour, "Daraa and the Altered Trajectory of the Syrian Crisis," 225-242.

[18] Colin Clarke, "Trends in Terrorism: What's on the Horizon in 2021?" Foreign Policy Research Institute, 2021, https://www.fpri.org/article/2021/01/trends-in-terrorism-whats-on-the-horizon-in-2021/.

[19] Anchal Vohra, "'Constant Fear': Iraq and Syria Face ISIL Resurgence," Al Jazeera, 2021, https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2021/3/2/we-liv-in-constant-fear-iraq-and-syria-face-isil-resurgence.

This is further reiterated by Hamid's insight that terrorism does not emerge and develop in a vacuum. Because of this, any strategy that treats terrorism as an isolated threat is doomed to failure. This insight was, of course, repeatedly reiterated during the US war on terrorism, and the main surprise is that it has still not been learned. Hamid therefore effectively restates a truism in noting, "You cannot fight terrorism just by fighting terrorism, and to think that you can is an illusion that has long hobbled U.S. policy in the Middle East and South Asia."[22] Given this, it is something of a shock to encounter Cordesman's assertion that "no official statements seriously address the problems in politics, governance, economics, and civil structures that make Iraq and especially Syria the equivalents of failed states." As he notes, in lieu of this, there has been a tendency to focus exclusively on military strategy.[23]

It is therefore surprising that Cordesman must reiterate the need to address the "causes" of terrorism instead of just the problem itself. Lewis further emphasizes this when she observes, "This is no longer a war of ideas against an extremist group with sparse networks, flashy strategic messaging, and limited technical offensive capability. It is necessary to avoid framing a U.S. counterterrorism strategy to defeat ISIS, as it if were."[24] In other words, the group's enhanced intelligence and counterintelligence capacity challenged and potentially undermined theory and strategy. Further, ISIS's focus on the population, along with its associated attempt to develop a common consciousness and clear distinction between "insiders" and "outsiders," clearly required a different response from the international community.[25]

The neglect of attention to failed states is all the more surprising given that there was previously such widespread recognition of their potential to threaten regional and international security and stability. State failure is in this respect discussed generally as a kind of incubator for various nefarious viruses, which then afflict and destabilize the wider world order. As a number of observers have noted, this is inherently "statist," as it is rendered with the intention of reinforcing and perpetuating the international order.

State failure has, in contrast to the performance of state-like functions by nonstate actors, received considerably more attention from international observers. However, there is a clear overlap between the two. As the state struggles to assert its authority, rebel groups and other competitors threaten central cities before the country splits into different entities, as one or more secessionist movements form functioning quasi-states. The central authority disappears, and territory is de facto parceled out among a heterogeneous mix of traditional authorities, religious leaders, warlords, and even nongovernmental organizations, who perform some state functions at the local level. In the absence of effective government control, both violence and illicit economic activity flourish, and both opposition groups and leaders of quasi-states take advantage.[26] This is how failed states become breeding grounds for extremism and organized terrorist groups.[27]

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[20] Jonathan Di John, "Conceptualising the Causes and Consequences of Failed States: A Critical Review of the Literature," London School of Economics, Development as State-Making, 2008.

[21] Olivier Nay, "Fragile and Failed States: Critical Perspectives on Conceptual Hybrids," *International Political Sciences Review*34, no. 3 (2013): 326-341.

[22] Ibid.

[23] Anthony Cordesman, "The Real World Capabilities of ISIS: The Threat Continues," Center for Strategic and International Studies, September 2020, https://www.csis.org/analysis/real-world-capabilities-isis-threat-continues.

[24] Ibid.

[25] Anthony Smith, *Ethno-Symbolism and Nationalism: A Cultural Approach* (New York: Routledge, 2009), 26.

State failure was more obviously apparent in Iraq than Syria. In the aftermath of the US-led invasion in 2003, the Iraqi state effectively collapsed, and ISIS's advances and successes were made possible by the failures of subsequent state building in the country. In Syria, the situation was somewhat different, as the state was viewed as a development leader in various fields and retained sufficient strength to be viewed as a potential threat to the regional and even international order. However, in just more than a decade of war, the Syrian state lost control of large parts of its territory and borders and could therefore be considered to be a failed state. Authority was directly challenged and undermined by transnational jihadist movements and a rising sectarianism that transformed the region.[28]

ISIS built its state on public dissatisfaction with the regime's institutions. Although extreme sharia punishments were unpopular among most of the population, Islamic courts were viewed as less corrupt than their secular counterparts and predecessors. The courts and the policing of the population helped to increase the group's legitimacy by appearing to uphold its claim to run a functioning state.[29] The religious police, or Hisbah, who sought out violations of Islamic law, meted out brutal punishments. Spies and police forces were omnipresent in areas under complete ISIS control. For example, the Hisbah made 60 patrols in one week alone in Raqqa.[30] Large detention centers were constructed in locations such as Al Tabqa Dam, where political prisoners and petty criminals were detained. Widespread repression meant any opposition would be harshly punished, and this further enhanced ISIS's territorial control. ISIS also extended its control over electronic media by prohibiting a wide number of websites and by monitoring internet use in cafés, and the Hisbah frequently scrolled through people's phones after stopping them at roadblocks.[31]

Fear and the engagement of foreign fighters were also important factors in ISIS's construction of a sectarian state. Hendawi notes that this created an organized and bureaucratic hierarchy that it relied on to manage public affairs. This new elite consisted of jihadi fighters who enjoyed special privileges and interests in the courts, looked down on "common people," and even ignored the rulings of clerics.[32] Their pre-eminence within the state structure recalls Smith's observation that the construction of the ideological state requires the implementation of policies that use force to ensure obedience and loyalty.[33]

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[26] Walter Clarke and Robert Gosende, "Somalia: Can a Collapsed State Reconstitute Itself," in *State Failure and State Weakness in a Time of Terror*, ed. Robert I. Rotberg (Washington: Brookings Institution Press, World Peace Foundation, 2003), 129–158.

[27] Stuart Eizenstat, John Edward Porter, and Jeremy Weinstein, "Rebuilding Weak States," *Foreign Affairs*, January 1, 2005, https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/2005-01-01/rebuilding-weak-states.

[28] Raymond Hinnebusch, "State De-Construction in Iraq and Syria," *Politische Vierteljahresschrift* 57, no. 4 (2016): 560-585.

[29] Aymen Al-Tamimi, "The Evolution of the Islamic State Administration," *Perspectives on Terrorism* 9, no. 4 (2015): 117-129.

[30] Charles Caris and Sam Reynolds, "ISIS Governance in Syria," ISW Middle East Security Report, July 2014, 16.

[31] Speckhard and Yayla, "The ISIS Emni," 9.

[32] Hamza Hendawi, "Islamic State's Double Standards Sow Growing Disillusion," *The Times of Israel*, January 19, 2016, https://www.timesofisrael.com/islamic-states-double-standards-sow-growing-disillusion/.

ISIS'S INCOME EXTRACTION

Money provided a strong incentive in an anarchic territory where the economy had effectively broken down. It is safe to assume that a number of ISIS members were more motivated by cash than any strong Salafi-jihadist conviction.[34] They were paid in silver and gold coins modeled on Arabia.[35] By developing strong links with local populations, ISIS gradually developed a self-sustaining financial model based on the spoils of war, the administration of natural resources, and various taxes.[36] ISIS's rapid rise was due to the capture of resources that came with territorial expansion. Burke observes that by mid-2014, ISIS controlled "a taxable population of some seven or eight million, oilfields (Ar-Raqqa, Deir ez-Zor, Al-Hasakah, Palmyra) and refineries, vast grain stores (Al-Hasakah), lucrative smuggling routes and vast stockpiles of arms and ammunition, as well as entire parks of powerful modern military equipment."[37] The capture of oilfields, many of which provided crude to different countries in the region, played an important role in the group's ascent. ISIS maximized the benefits by limiting supplies and selling oil to their enemies for vastly inflated prices. At one point, revenue from Damascus's government accounted for billions of US dollars—and most of ISIS's funds.[38]

ISIS's dependence on oil income was exacerbated by external sanctions and military actions. Even before this, Syria's ailing oil industry did not provide a sufficient basis for state building. Woertz observes, "The country's oil industry was already in a bad state before its civil war." It should be remembered that the ability of ISIS to exploit the full potential of an industry that had substantially reduced its output before the war—bearing in mind the level of technical expertise required to fully exploit the potential of available oil reserves—was already open to question (confirmed by the fact that it was forced to sell its oil at a discounted rate). Therefore, even before the western reprisals and the closure of oil-distribution routes, the ability of this resource to sustain state building was already open to question.[39] Woertz underlines that ISIS's oil production "might have been a lot for a terror group, but not for someone who intends to run a state and rule over an extended territory."[40]

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[33] Antony Smith, *State-Making and Nation-Building* (New York: Pergamon Press, 1979): 228–263.

[34] Gregory Johnsen, "The Rise of ISIS," *Great Decisions* 1, no. 1 (2016): 16.

[35] Caris and Reynolds, "ISIS Governance in Syria," 18.

[36] Johnston et al., *Foundations of the Islamic State*; Jacob N. Shapiro and Danielle F. Jung, "The Terrorist Bureaucracy: Inside the Files of the Islamic State in Iraq," *Boston Globe*, December 14, 2014, https://www.bostonglobe.com/ideas/2014/12/14/the-terrorist-bureaucracy-inside-files-islamic-state-iraq/QtRMOARRYows0D18faA2FP/story.html.

[37] Feliz Solomon, "Oil and Gas Sales to the Syrian Regime Are Now ISIS's Largest Source of Funds," *Fortune*, January 2017, https://fortune.com/2017/01/20/oil-gas-isis-syria-assad/.

[38] Ibid.

[39] Eckart Woertz, "How Long Will ISIS Last Economically?," *Notes Internationals*, October 2014, 2-5, https://www.cidob.org/en/publications/publication_series/notes_internacionals/n1_98/how_long_will_isis_last_economically.

[40] Ibid.

However, while oil was ISIS's main commodity, taxation and the confiscation of property accounted for the other half of its revenues.[41] Zakat, a form of religious tax, was imposed on millions and produced substantial income. The eastern governorates contain the most important source of basic agriculture in Syria. They are the first producer of wheat, barley, and cotton. Therefore, farmers and their produce provided another source of income, as it was possible to profit several times from the same crop.[42] ISIS also forced Christians and Kurds to pay a tribute and made it clear that if payment was not forthcoming, they would have to leave the territory.[43] In Deir ez-Zor, the group seized the property of Christians who had previously been displaced from the governorate; in Raqqa, it confiscated and looted Kurdish possessions.[44] Its Christian policy in Raqqa was implemented in accordance with a law ("the Dhimma Contract in the Levant between the Islamic State and the Christians of Raqqa"), with Christians and Armenians also forced to pay a tax.[45]

More often, however, its extraction of this tribute took the form of looting, which raises questions about the sustainability of this income for future state-building efforts. Further, the reliance on such crude means of resource extraction presumably undermined efforts to develop reasonable alternatives. While functioning as a mafia would enable ISIS to forcibly extract resources from the local population—and from oppressed minorities in particular—it would also inhibit the group's ability to produce a functioning state based on predictable and sustainable income streams. In the long term, persistent criminality would inhibit ISIS's attempts to consolidate and achieve statehood.[46] The establishment of functioning state institutions would require competence, continuity, and a degree of professionalism, things that are entirely at odds with the persistence of mafia tendencies.

Aside from the impact of looting on ISIS's state building, the extent to which it accounted for such a large part of ISIS's income would also be a cause for concern.[47] Nearly a quarter of archaeological sites in ISIS-controlled areas were affected by looting. Such activities were estimated to produce between $150–$200 million for the group every year.[48] Remarkable in its own right, this figure is also important because, similarly to ransoms, it highlights ISIS's reliance on a non-replicable source of income. The upper-range figure of $200 million is, for example, half the lower end of the range cited as incomes derived from oil, ISIS's most important revenue source, in 2015.

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[41] Simon Mabon and Stephen Royle, *The Origins of ISIS: The Collapse of Nations and Revolution in the Middle East* (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2017).

[42] Erika Solomon, Guy Chazan, and Sam Jones, "Isis Inc: How Oil Fuels the Jihadi Terrorists," *Financial Times*, October 14, 2015, https://www.ft.com/content/b8234932-719b-11e5-ad6d-f4ed76f0900a.

[43] Tribute, called Al-Jizya in Islam, is a sum of money paid by non-Muslims who are able to fight "Dhimmis" in exchange for securing their protection—with the exception of the elderly, women, children, the infirm, the disabled, and those who fight in the ranks of Muslims. This law was stopped 14 centuries ago. "Al-Quds Al-Arabi, Al-Nusra Displace Christians in Deir ez-Zor Governorate," 2015, http://bit.ly/3pzr9dw.

[44] "Thousands of Arabs Driven out by Kurds' Ethnic Cleansing," *The Times*, 2015, https://bit.ly/340HrSY.

[45] "Syria: Christians of Raqqa Choose to Pay the Tax and Adhere to Their Religion," France24, 2014, https://bit.ly/3KsHj3a; interviews conducted by the author with Raqqa refugees in Britain, 2022.

[46] Woertz, "How Long Will ISIS Last," 3.

[47] Willem Theo Oosterveld and Willem Bloem, "The Rise and Fall of ISIS: From Evitability to Inevitability," The Hague Centre for Strategic Studies, 2016/17, https://hcss.nl/wp-content/uploads/2017/02/The-Rise-and-Fall-of-ISIS.pdf.

[48] Ibid, 12.

The gains from extracted incomes would be further depleted by the forcible relocation of minorities, such as Christians. Referring to the use of local populations for ransoms, Woertz contends, “There are limits to this strategy and the risks of alienating the local population on which ISIS ultimately depends are considerable.”[49] However, ISIS arguably never overcame this fundamental tension between immediate resource extraction and the long-term generation of legitimacy in areas under its control. Johnston et al. also suggest that ISIS was not committed to sustaining the provision of services at the level required to generate and sustain public legitimacy.[50]

The Islamic State’s expansion depended on continued capital inflows, and this distinguished it from competitors. ISIS replaced failed services such as transport and electricity, and it reinstated good salaries. This enabled it to embed itself into the fabric of public life and make residents reliant on it. The public-service provisions enhanced ISIS’s legitimacy by enabling it to present itself as more representative and responsive. However, the billions of dollars it generated from taxes, oil, antiquities, foreign donations, and looting quickly eroded. In 2014, for example, its annual revenue was $1.9 billion, but after coalition strikes, it lost many regions in Syria. By July 2016, this income had declined to an estimated $449 million.[51]

Although Johnston et al. describe “creative diversification” as one of the defining features of ISIS’s revenue generation, there are grounds for questioning this assertion.[52] This criticism does not necessarily relate to the range of sources of income, but rather to the types and extent of income sources that are required for sustainable state building. In this regard, it is instructive to observe that they assert that ISIS adopted different financial extraction tactics in areas that were and were not under its control. However, as we have seen, this distinction does not hold, as even in areas where a taxation system operates, its form of extraction could more accurately be described as looting. It is therefore inaccurate to claim that ISIS’s taxation-extraction methods were somehow enhanced when it consolidated territorial control over a given area. Indeed, mafia tactics, including the demanding of what was effectively protection money, persisted alongside the ostensible development of state institutions. ISIS’s reliance on oil resources and “primitive” forms of extraction also throws into question this assertion of “creative diversification.”

Interestingly, the Johnston et al. analysis of ISIS’s financial flexibility focuses largely on the pre- and post-state stages of its existence. For example, when they assert that “the Islamic State is an adaptable and resilient organization,” they are judging it as an insurgent group rather than as a state organization.[53] Their assessment largely relates to its ability to sustain itself as a group and to adjust to the challenges of fighting an insurgency; this is also the level at which international observers are frequently predisposed to discuss the group’s flexibility and innovation. By comparison, the adaptation and flexibility that it showed in responding to governance challenges (i.e., when it existed as a state) have received considerably less attention. The authors acknowledge this distinction when they observe that ISIS can be considered a “rich terrorist group but a poor nation state."[54] In this way, there is a tendency to assess ISIS against the standards of an insurgency rather than against the requirements of statehood. When the latter rather than the former are applied, ISIS's financial resources and extractive capabilities are not particularly enhanced or developed. For example, it is instructive to compare to this the various forms of revenue generation that Hamas has developed and applied in the Gaza Strip. Indeed, the authors explicitly acknowledge this when they assert that ISIS is, for the most part, a well-funded terror group. From this perspective, the central issue was not how closely ISIS's resource-extraction capabilities approximated the established model of the state, but if its resources established a sound and sustainable basis for state building in areas under its control. Of the two questions, it is the former that has received considerably more attention. The efficiency of ISIS's governance, its financial governance in particular, has received considerably less attention.

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[49] Woertz, “How Long Will ISIS Last,” 3.

[50] Patrick B. Johnston, Mona Alami, Colin P. Clarke, and Howard J. Shatz, “Return and Expand? The Finances and Prospects of the Islamic State after the Caliphate,” RAND Corporation, 87, https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RR3046.html.

[51] “Islamic State Caliphate Shrinks a Further 12 Percent in 2016, IHS Says,” *Business Wire*, July 2016, https://www.businesswire.com/news/home/20160710005034/en/Islamic-State-Caliphate-Shrinks-a-Further-12-Percent-in-2016-IHS-Says.

[52] Johnston et al., “Return and Expand,” 87.

[53] Ibid, Chapter 5.

Johnston et al. illustrate this when they fail to acknowledge that ISIS's extractive capabilities remained relatively unsophisticated when it established territorial control, closely resembling those that it had applied when it was still a terrorist group. Its extraction still relied heavily on coercion and the threat of expulsion or death. Similarly, the use of looting and the soliciting of ransoms attest to the perpetuation of crude and underdeveloped forms of revenue generation and extraction. In conflating the perpetuation of mafia practices with the development of a tax system, the authors propose an unsustainable conflation.

It is also essential to acknowledge that oil resources, for a range of reasons—including technical difficulties and the structural weaknesses of a declining oil industry—provided an insufficient basis for state building, even before the international community directly targeted this source of income through sanctions and military action. In the long run, ISIS would have needed to seek alternative forms of income, whether through territorial conquest (which would impose further strains on the caliphate) or other types of economic development. But ISIS remained dependent on a source of income that was ultimately insufficient to sustain its ambitions.[55]

POLITICIZATION OF RELIGION IN THE ISLAMIC STATE

We can view ISIS's state building, and political Islam more generally, as part of a process in which the Islamic world has sought to come to terms with modernity. This does not suggest an outright or complete rejection but a negotiation. This understanding makes it possible to link the discussion of ISIS's state building to a broader analysis of state and governance failure. In this regard, it is important to note that the emergence of ISIS did not entirely surprise US intelligence observers. We must also note that ISIS did not conceive of or justify its state on the basis of the accepted and widely acknowledged norms of statehood but instead by appealing to Islamic precedents and justifications. The caliphate is a form of Islamic government whose head of state is a caliph,[56] a successor to the Prophet Muhammad who is, by virtue of this, the leader of the Islamic community. Different Muslim leaders and groups called for the caliphate to be re-established after the collapse of the Ottoman Empire in 1924, but this did not prevent ISIS founder Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi's claims from being widely rejected in the Islamic world.[57] Indeed, Islamic opinion broadly aligned with Bishara's assertion that ISIS was an imagined group that reimagined its texts and origins.[58]

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[54] Ibid, 86-102.

[55] Ibid.

[56] It referred to three traditional methods for seizing the leadership of Islam and the Umma. The Sharia Council argued that the commander of the faithful and caliph are directly descended from Prophet Muhammad's Quraysh tribe and are legitimized by an elite group through elections. ISIS believed that it was the legitimate caliphate and acted accordingly. See Douglas Jordan, "Caliphate," in Salem Press Encyclopaedia, 2020. The majority of the Islamic world, including Salafi-jihadist scholars, rejected ISIS's claim and refused to recognize it. For example, Abu Qataba publicly stated that "there exists no emir firmly established such that he should be treated as the caliph or with similar names and titles." See Bunzel, "From Paper State to Caliphate," 27.

The notion of an "Islamic State" was both a paradox and an anomaly insofar as the caliphate was already a rejection of the Westphalian state, powerfully demonstrated by ISIS's destruction of the border between Iraq and Syria.[59] ISIS viewed those who rejected the premise of an Islamic state as apostates and contended that the caliphate was an essential part of Islamic identity. It should be remembered that the concept of "national identity" has historically been alien to the Arab world. Furthermore, Islam, one of the few unifying forces in the region, "undermines the whole notion of nation-states as it is concerned only with community and not with territory."[60] Nationalism, and the nation-state, could only ever be externally imposed and sustained.[61]

ISIS was confronted by the challenge of constructing a state without a homogeneous nation, and this is why the "state's legitimacy derived from its support for extremist Sunni militants."[62] The Islamic State presented itself as the representative of authentic Islam and a descendant of previous generations that carried the banners of caliphate and jihad.[63] The construction of the sectarian state proceeded through accommodation, assimilation, and exclusion. Accordingly, in the first two areas, ISIS absorbed most of the nationalities in its state; in the third, exclusion, it committed massacres and removed and destroyed cultural and political symbols.[64] It appropriated and refashioned the tradition of Islam for its own political purposes and, in so doing, further underlined the convoluted connection between politics and religion. Wood refers to ISIS's "Islamic essence" and asserts that it is intertwined with its political essence.[65] Yusuf advances a very different argument, suggesting that its militancy "has everything to do with religion," before adding the essential caveat that this was a "misguided, fanatical, ideological, and politicized religion."[66] In other words, militancy had everything to do with a *particular form* of religion.

ISIS prescribed and brutally enforced a strict regime that was based on its violent and extreme interpretation of the Quran. It decontextualized Islamic texts with the deliberate intention of legitimizing its violent campaigns. The concept of jihad played a particularly important role in helping to uphold gendered codes in the caliphate, as it reinforced the belief that men are "front-line" leaders and fighters.[67] It privileged action over public esteem and popularity.[68] The concept of kuffar (unbeliever) also reinforced a rigid reading of the Quran and was the product of an encounter between Salafi jihadism and Sunni sectarianism.[69] These concepts were both further defined and complicated by the tactical use of terrorism, which in the 20th century became "an orthodox part of guerrilla strategy."[70] The Islamic State adopted the ideology of al-Qaeda; however, this ideology was not the main goal but instead a tool for obtaining money and power. The state did not follow a specific Islamic blueprint but rejected the four (Sunni) schools of Islam and continued to interpret legal texts in ways that justified its actions.[71] In Al-Hasakah, the Yazidis were subject to murder, looting, and kidnapping. A 2016 UN report labeled these acts of genocide, describing how ISIS sought to eradicate the Yazidis through murder, sexual violence, and enslavement, inflicting torture and psychological trauma, and removing Yazidi children from their families.[72]

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[57] Madawi Al-Rasheed, Carool Kersten, and Marat Shterin, "The Caliphate: Nostalgic Memory and Contemporary Visions," in *Demystifying the Caliphate*, ed. Al-Rasheed, Kersten, and Shterin (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012), 1-30.

[58] Azmi Bishara, *Sect, Sectarianism, and Imaginary Sects* (Doha: Arab Center for Research and Policy Studies, 2018), 35.

[59] Caris and Reynolds, "ISIS Governance in Syria."

[60] Tim Mackintosh Smith, *Arabs: A 3,000 Year History of Peoples, Tribes and Empires* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2019), 432.

[61] John Breuilly, *Nationalism and the State* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1994), 152.

[62] Harris Mylonas, *The Politics of Nation-Building: Making Co-Nationals, Refugees, and Minorities* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 44.

[63] Samer Bakkour, "The Battle for Deir ez-Zor (2011-2017)," *Actors and Dynamics in the Syrian Conflict's Middle Phase Between Contentious Politics, Militarization and Regime Resilience*, ed. Jasmine K. Gani and Raymond Hinnebusch (London: Routledge, 2022).

[64] Isabel Coles and Ned Parker, "How Saddam's Men help Islamic State Rule," Reuters, December 11, 2015, http://www.reuters.com/investigates/special-report/mideast-crisis-iraq-islamicstate/.

[65] Graeme Wood, "What ISIS Really Wants," *The Atlantic*, March 2015, https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2015/03/what-isis-really-wants/384980/.

[66] Hamza Yusuf, "The Plague Within," *Sandala*, July 5, 2016, https://sandala.org/blogs/uncategorized/the-plague-within.

In seeking to build a sectarian state and instill ideological purity, ISIS selectively drew on extremist Islamic teachings to establish its ideology, "which it reproduce[d] as legitimate religious obligations."[73] ISIS used education as a means of "winning hearts and minds" and spreading its ideology.[74] Its influence was most notable among the illiterate and ignorant, as it implicitly acknowledged them by seeking to replace schools with "religious" institutions. The group also replaced the regime's curriculum on the grounds that it was a system of the "Nusayrism infidel."[75] It provided instructions to teachers and educators to remove all secular references from their teaching, which included deleting references to the "Syrian Arab Republic" and replacing the word "homeland" with "Islamic State."[76] Islamic outreach events (Da'wahs) imposed further restrictions on teachers, who were also required to undergo compulsory legal training. In areas where ISIS exerted extensive control, such as Deir ez-Zor, it provided primary-level education focused on the Islamic creed, jurisprudence, and the life of the prophet.[77] In some ISIS-controlled areas like southern Damascus, education came to a complete halt.[78]

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[67] Jihad is a willingness to target sects or ethnicities as "Kuffar" or "nonbelievers." It favors a rigid reading of the Quran and combines Salafi jihadism with Sunni sectarianism. It predominantly appeals to ultra-conservative Muslims who favor action over patience. See Jay Sekulow, *Rise of ISIS: A Threat We Cannot Ignore* (New York: Howard Books, 2014). Stenersen suggests Jihadism can be defined as a subcategory of militant Islamism that is characterized by the use of violence (framed as "Jihād") and is used to achieve political aims. It rejects the nation-state and international order. See Anne Stenersen, "Jihadism after Caliphate: Towards a New Typology," *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies* 47, no. 5 (2020): 774-793; Kiriloi M. Ingram, "More than 'Jihadi Brides' and 'Eye Candy': How Dabiq Appeals to Western Women," International Centre for Counter-Terrorism, August 12, 2016, https://www.icct.nl/publication/more-jihadi-brides-and-eye-candy-how-dabiq-appeals-western-women.

[68] Donald Holbrook, "Al-Qaeda and the Rise of ISIS," *Survival* 57, no. 2 (2015): 102.

[69] Johnsen, "The Rise of ISIS," 16.

[70] Richard Betts, "The Soft Underbelly of American Primacy: Tactical Advantages of Terror," *Political Science Quarterly* 117, no. 1 (2002): 19–36.

[71] Lina Khatib, "The Islamic State's Strategy: Lasting and Expanding," Carnegie Middle East Center, June 2015.

[72] "United Nations Commission of Inquiry on Syria: Daesh Committing Genocide Against the Yazidis," OHCHR, 2016, https://bit.ly/2V8Ypur.

[73] Louise Richardson, *What Terrorists Want* (New York: Random House, 2006), 67.

[74] Charles Lister, "Profiling the Islamic State," Brookings Papers, no. 13, November 2014, 28.

[75] Mark Townsend, "How Islamic State Is Training Child Killers in Doctrine of Hate," *The Guardian*, 2016, https://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/mar/05/islamic-state-trains-purer-child-killers-in-doctrine-of-hate.

[76] Ahmed Al-Rawi, "Islamic State in Iraq and Syria's Standardized Media and Jihadist Nation-State Building Efforts," *Communication and the Public* (2019):1-15

In a document titled "Principles of Administration of the Islamic State," ISIS revealed its vision of a deeply divided society that rejected other religions and sects.[79] Militarism and hardline Salafi rhetoric ensured that Christian minorities would remain silent or seek to join the regime. Christians were a victim of the sectarian "state" and a demographic war. ISIS severely threatened and harshly penalized those who practiced Christian celebrations or rituals in their own homes; it also burned down several churches and transformed others into ISIS headquarters and military checkpoints.[80] In February 2015, the group stormed the town of Tal Tamr in Al-Hasakah and surrounded villages inhabited by the Assyrian Christian minority; many civilians were killed, and hundreds were kidnapped.[81] ISIS viewed Christians as part of the infidel west and forced them to convert to Islam by threatening them with death. As a result, many Christians, including Assyrians and Armenians, converted. Children who were too young to convert were sold into slavery.[82]

ISIS'S USE OF SECTARIAN DIVISIONS

Although we have strongly emphasized the novel aspects of ISIS's rule, it was also an "outgrowth of broader global trends of Islamization that stress the tensions between religiosity and modernity."[83] However, in key respects, it also challenged this inheritance. The 2003 invasion of Iraq created an environment where Islamic State could thrive and develop.[84] As the country slid into civil war, the group emerged from a complex and continually shifting resistance movement that brought together Iraqi and foreign jihadists. Although Saddam Hussein's secular regime had brutally persecuted Islamists, the conflict created a space where former enemies could coalesce around a common cause. In addition, the Syrian regime permitted foreign jihadists to enter Iraq through its eastern border to fight coalition forces in the country.[85]

Al-Qaeda in Iraq, under the leadership of Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, was a prominent group within the resistance. But Zarqawi was a divisive figure, and his relations with Ayman al-Zawahiri, then Osama bin Laden's deputy, were strained.[86] Al-Qaeda in Iraq sought to deepen the civil war by carrying out terrorist attacks on the country's Shia Muslims. It was sustained by a widespread belief that the country's president, Nouri al-Maliki, was pursuing a sectarian political agenda.[87] However, Zarqawi's death in 2006 was a major blow to his group, whose use of indiscriminate violence—which had initially been an essential part of its emergence and development—increasingly alienated Sunni tribesmen and communities.[88] The rising discontent eventually coalesced into the "Anbar Awakening," when Sunnis in Anbar Province cooperated closely with the United States. Enhanced ties between local fighters and American and Iraqi security forces substantially depleted al-Qaeda in Iraq and resulted in its effective defeat by 2011.[89] However, the withdrawal of US troops from the country that year enabled Islamic State in Iraq (ISI) to emerge and fill the vacuum. ISI also benefited from the central government's sectarian governance and security interventions.[90] It also developed and enhanced the Baathist repressive apparatus in crucial respects. Speckhard and Yayla observe that the "plan was to emulate Saddam Hussein's omnipresent security organs, with the goal of having each individual keeping an eye on each other, thereby creating a security environment in which everyone lived in a state of fear and uncertainty about whether or not they, too, were being spied upon."[91]

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[77] Caris and Reynolds, "ISIS Governance in Syria."

[78] "Demographic Changes and Forced Displacement in Syria," Support Coordination Unit, 2017, http://bit.ly/2UqBz2C.

[79] "The Principles of Administering the Islamic State,"Islamic State, 2014, https://www.scribd.com/document/292084330/Islamic-Stateblueprint.

[80] "Al-Nusra Displace Christians in Deir ez-Zor Governorate,"*Al-Sharq Al-Awsat*, 2015, http://bit.ly/3pzr9dw; Hadi Salama, "The Wilayat of Raqqa: Ending the Christian Existence," *Al-Modon*, 2014, https://bit.ly/2JtyBn8.

[81] "Scores of Syrian Christians Kidnapped by Islamic," *New York Times*, 2015, https://nyti.ms/2VANpaR.

[82] Salama, "The Wilayat of Raqqa: Ending the Christian Existence."

[83] Willem Theo Oosterveld and Willem Bloem, "The Rise And Fall Of ISIS: From Evitability to Inevitability," Hague Centre for Strategic Studies (2017), https://www.jstor.org/stable/resrep12613?seq=5#metadata_info_tab_contents

[84] The Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) was formed in 2006 after the death of Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, the Al-Qaeda in Iraq (AQI) leader. As a merger of AQI and various other Sunni militant groups in Iraq, it was created with the intention of establishing a self-sufficient Islamic state that could occupy and govern territory. In the period 2007-09, its initial attempts to establish this state failed. Five years later, it declared a caliphate. Lister, "Profiling the Islamic State," 4.

[85] Mamoon Alabbasi, "Iraq Asked Syria's Assad to Stop Aiding 'Jihadists': Former Official," Middle East Eye, October 2015, https://www.middleeasteye.net/news/iraq-asked-syrias-assad-stop-aiding-jihadists-former-official.

[86] "The Islamic State: Background," Jewish Virtual Library, https://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/isis-background.

After ISIS waged its June 2014 offensive in Iraq and seized key Iraqi cities such as Mosul, Samarra, and Tikrit, Baghdadi announced the establishment of a caliphate, or Islamic State, in Iraq and Syria. In Syria, this included the whole of Raqqa and Deir ez-Zor, and parts of the Aleppo, Al-Hasakah, As-Suwayda, Daraa, Hama, Homs, and Idlib governorates. In presuming to speak on behalf of Muslims across the globe, Baghdadi inaugurated his state-building project. In contrast to Iraq, where the group had general influence among Sunnis, its influence in Syria was most pronounced in poor and marginalized areas with a diverse population mix, where religious observance was conservative and there was a strong emphasis on customs and traditions. For example, in the region of Al-Hajar al-Aswad, which is on the southern side of Damascus and has a population of 60,000, its influence expanded rapidly among immigrants and refugees in "slum areas."[92]

ISI's growing influence in Syria distorted the uprising by dividing the opposition. Crucially, it also contributed to the conflict's becoming viewed as a war against terrorism, or a "war of all against all." The emergence of ISI was by no means seen unfavorably by Assad, and in this regard it is important to note that regime violence was the main catalyst of the group's expansion in Syria.[93] Assad believed ISI's emergence provided an opportunity to split the opposition by promoting sectarianism; this would in turn force the international community to choose between the secular regime and the Islamist opposition.

In January 2012, ISI members including Abu Mohammad al-Julani announced the formation of Jabhat al-Nusra. Although the group was initially loyal to Baghdadi, Julani later rejected Baghdadi's proposal to merge ISI and al-Nusra. ISI, in turn, ignored the advice of al-Qaeda leader

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[87] Michael Howard, 'Iraq Slips Towards Civil War', *Guardian*, 2006, https://www.theguardian.com/world/2006/feb/23/iraq.iraqtimeline1

[88] "The Islamic State: Background," Jewish Virtual Library.

[89] Ibid.

[90] "Al-Qaeda's Resurgence in Iraq," Committee on Foreign Affairs House of Representatives, February 2014, https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/CHRG-113hhrg86588/html/CHRG-113hhrg86588.htm

[91] Speckhard and Yayla, "The ISIS Emni," 2-16.

[92] "This Is How ISIS Ruled South of Damascus," *Al-Araby Al-Jadeed*, May 2018, https://bit.ly/2QxECDb.

[93] Nicolas Henin, *Jihad Academy: The Misperceptions of Islamic State and Their Consequences* (London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2019), 52-79

Ayman al-Zawahiri to focus on Iraq, and it began to infiltrate eastern parts of Syria. Raqqa would henceforth become the capital of Baghdadi's Islamic State, declared on June 29, 2014. The newly named ISIS would focus on fighting other opposition groups instead of the regime, which it justified on the grounds that "fighting the apostates takes precedence over the Nusayrism" (referring to Syria's Alawites). This echoed its assertion that "fighting the apostates is more important than fighting the Jews."[94]

Although ISIS was ostensibly committed to establishing an administrative and legal system that overrode ethnic distinctions, it quickly realized the political utility of sectarianism and actively sought to exploit it by spreading fear and ignorance along with jihadist ideology.[95] "Significantly, its efforts were not just focused on minorities but also on the Sunni Arab majority, including by imposing strict penalties for disloyalty." Violence was part of ISIS's governance of Arab Sunni tribes in the country's northeast. In the initial stages of its rule, it used tribal networks to control local communities. To ensure obedience, it replaced local traditional leaders with new ones whom it then used to establish strong relationships with the communities. In acknowledging the danger of a tribal "awakening" like the one that shifted the course of Iraq's civil war against al-Qaeda in Iraq, ISIS initially reassured tribal leaders that it had "opened the door to forgiveness."[96] However, the carrot was accompanied by the stick, as shown by the ruthless crushing of an uprising by the Al-Shaitat tribes in Deir ez-Zor governorate.[97] In response to the uprising, which occurred in response to ISIS's presence and interference in public affairs,[98] Baghdadi's group besieged and bombed the villages, then entered and took control. Hundreds were killed, and 75,000 to 100,000 were displaced across Syria.[99]

In Raqqa, ISIS viewed the Kurds as partisan and militarized, despite the fact that most were not members of any parties and/or political and military forces. Nonetheless, ISIS displaced all the residents of Kurdish villages in the countryside of Ain Issa, looted their homes, and burned their crops.[100] It also used public brutality and violence to ensure the submission of local communities, including Kurdish Yazidis. They were subject to forced conversion, mass displacement, kidnapping, torture, and, in the case of Yazidi women and girls, sexual violence and enslavement. In addition, their holy monuments and shrines were also destroyed. There was not and could not be any sustainable theological justification for such crimes, which openly defied the constraints and limitations that religious discrimination imposes on sectarian state building.[101] In Al-Hasakah, in the country's rural southeast, ISIS intimidated, beheaded, burned, and destroyed, including by planting explosive devices in public properties. It also stole homes in many towns, including Tall Hamis, and impeded merchants and those with livelihoods, with the aim of forcing them to leave.[102] The property of absentees was expropriated, and that of the displaced was seized and used to accommodate ISIS members from across the world.

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[94] Al-Khatib, "ISIS Strategy: Enduring and Expanding."

[95] Bishara, *Sect, Sectarianism, and Imaginary Sects*, 27

[96] Series of interviews with people from Deir ez-Zor and Al-Hasakah, January 2021.

[97] This was in the countryside around the city of Al-Bukamal, in Deir ez-Zor's Eastern Countryside; Al-Tamimi, "The Evolution of the Islamic State Administration."

[98] Interview with Muhammad Al-Zaalan, the Al-Shaitat's official spokesperson in Europe.

[99] Bakkour, "The Battle for Deir ez-Zor (2011-2017)".

[100] Ibid.

[101] "United Nations Commission of Inquiry on Syria," OHCHR.

[102] Interviews with Al-Hasakah Refugees, conducted in Britain in August 2021.

THE COLLAPSE OF THE CALIPHATE

In acknowledging ISIS's considerable state-building achievements, we should also recognize its weaknesses, which include its failure to advance into Iraq in 2014, its resource deficiencies, and the inefficiencies of its revenue-generation system.[103] Ideological and strategic shortcomings also sowed confusion among the population and undermined popular support.[104] Shapiro focuses on weaknesses in ISIS's internal governance, noting an overreliance on social control as a way of eliminating resistance. In also highlighting its failure to replace state institutions, he pre-empts the question of whether ISIS managed to establish a state.[105] Any discussion should also acknowledge that disintegration began at an early stage. In July 2016, six months before his boss left office, Ashton Carter, US President Barack Obama's secretary of defense, claimed that ISIS was being defeated on the battlefield. Any analysis should also balance internal and external factors that contributed to collapse. In this regard, internal factors such as a loss of territory, inefficiencies in ISIS's taxation system, and massive population outflows should also be recognized.

In reflecting on the scope, significance and extent of ISIS's state building, however, we are confronted by an important question that we have not yet acknowledged: whether the very collapse of the caliphate was attributable to the failure of ISIS's project. In attending to this question, it is first necessary to recognize the importance of external factors, in particular an increasingly effective anti-ISIS coalition and its intervention through aerial bombings and direct and indirect intervention on the ground. Even without entering into counterfactuals, we can confidently assert that the caliphate would, in all probability, still exist in some form. In other words, international military intervention was the key external factor in the collapse of the caliphate.

This does not, however, prevent us from identifying weaknesses and contradictions intrinsic to ISIS's state building and reflecting on their relative importance and significance. Ultimately, we seek to understand whether these weaknesses, in isolation and in combination, could conceivably have contributed to state collapse. This discussion refers mostly to the dimensions of ISIS's state building—stabilization, income allocation, politicization of religion, and exploitation of sectarian divisions—that we have been considering.

First, in reflecting on stabilization, it is essential to recognize that ISIS failed to acknowledge the key lesson that emerged from the experience of al-Qaeda in Iraq, namely the need to adjust governance practices to the local context and its specific needs.[106] This lesson was well-learned by al-Nusra, whose governance was more flexible and adaptable.[107] In contrast, ISIS relied disproportionately on the use of violence to enforce its will, especially in its handling of tribal disputes. While this was attributable to a number of factors, including religious ideology—which mandated the evisceration of "apostates"—it also reflected the preponderant influence of foreign jihadists within the caliphate's structure.[108] As a result, ISIS's presence in Syria could to some extent be said to resemble a foreign occupation.

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[103] Jacob Shapiro, "A Predictable Failure: The Political Economy of the Decline of the Islamic State," *Combating Terrorism Centre* 9, no. 9 (2016): 28; Brian Glyn Williams, "Who Defeated ISIS? The Pentagon's War Maps," *Middle East Policy* 27, no. 3 (2020): 152-193.

[104] Lina Al-Khatib, "ISIS Strategy: Enduring and Expanding," Carnegie Center, 2015, https://carnegie-mec.org/2015/06/29/ar-pub-60542

[105] Shapiro, "A Predictable Failure," 28.

[106] Ali A. Allawi, *The Occupation of Iraq: Winning the War, Losing the Peace* (New Haven: 2007).

[107] *The Al-Nusra Front: The History of the Syrian Rebel Group Formerly Associated with Al-Qaeda*, Charles River Editors, 2018.

In contrast to al-Qaeda in Iraq, ISIS did succeed in establishing a functioning legal system and providing a degree of stability to the local population. However, people's perceptions of these benefits were likely to be qualified or canceled entirely by the heavy reliance on extra-legal actors, most notably the Hisbah, to uphold law and order.[109] The heavy-handed application of this law was also likely to inflame local resentments. ISIS's unwillingness to tailor or qualify its ideological and sectarian impulses meant that it frequently acted as a destabilizing force in areas under its control.[110]

A state or a political status quo cannot be sustained purely through force.[111] Even totalitarian regimes rest upon some degree of consent or public support. ISIS's reliance on force and fear was, therefore, actually a weakness, as it limited the group's ability to exert political power. Here, it is essential to recall Hannah Arendt's insight, later adapted by Michel Foucault, that power can only exist and be asserted in the absence of violence. Insofar as an action is forcibly compelled, it cannot be said to be a product of power.[112] Given this theory, we can conclude that ISIS's governance remained underdeveloped; this was a key weakness in its state-building project.

By contrast, inefficiencies in resource extraction can be regarded as a relatively insignificant factor that had limited implications for the success or failure of state building more generally. In large part, this was because ISIS was able to draw on other sources of income, though it was also due to the fact that external military attacks on key infrastructure, most notably oil production and transportation facilities, caused sharp depreciations in the financial resources available to the caliphate.[113] It should also be remembered that the caliphate experienced a sharp decline at a relatively early stage of its existence, and it still adapted and persisted.[114]

The role of the politicization of religion in the success or failure of ISIS's state building is somewhat more complicated. First, it should be acknowledged that the group's distinctive interpretation of political Islam was of importance for only some of its members. A significant number, by contrast, were motivated more by the financial incentives that ISIS was able to offer its members.[115] Second, Baghdadi's claim to be a supreme ruler was rejected by most Muslims across the world and by almost all Islamic authorities.[116] However, as the concept of "imagined communities" makes clear, a nation does not exist and should not be assessed at the level of objective truth. Instead, the key level is its political significance—more precisely, its ability to command hearts and compel actions.[117] Similarly, it has previously been observed that political Islam is less a product of theocratic justifications and precedents, and more an attempt to adapt religion and address it to contextual challenges and obstacles.[118] On this basis, it can be observed that ISIS was strikingly successful in mobilizing Muslims across the world to advance its state-building aims, including by fighting for it; this ability remained strong even at the point of its demise.

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[108] Jennifer Jefferies, "ISIS Administrative and Territorial Organization," European Institute of the Mediterranean, 2016, https://www.iemed.org/publication/isis-administrative-and-territorial-organization/.

[109] Ibid.

[110] Jessica Stern and J.M Berger, *ISIS: The State of Terror* (New York: HarperCollins, 2015)

[111] Hannah Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (New York London: San Diego, 1973).

[112] Ibid.

[113] Johnston et al., *Foundations of the Islamic State*.

[114] Ibid.

[115] Caris Reynolds, "ISIS Governance in Syria."

[116] Shafik Mandhai, "Muslim Leaders Reject Baghdadi's Caliphate," Al-Jazeera, 2014, https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2014/7/7/muslim-leaders-reject-baghdadis-caliphate.

[117] Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London: Verso Books, 2006).

Finally, ISIS's attempts to utilize sectarian divisions for political purposes was directly opposed to the model of the nation-state, in which the "nation" transcends established differences and distinctions.[119] As in the case of stabilization, its failures in this regard were attributable to the privileging of ideological and religious motivations over the prerequisites of effective state building. Its deliberate efforts to instill sectarian hatreds and enmities did not just fail to yield political results but clearly benefited an immediate adversary, the regime. ISIS's persecution of minorities had, at best, a limited military or strategic rationale and was conducted based on ideological and religious motivations that frequently exceeded, and ran counter to, state-building imperatives. Crucially, this aspect of its state building was also profoundly destabilizing. Displacement uprooted entire communities and created chaos. The crude and arbitrary application of violence further empowered jihadists and others who presumed themselves to be above and beyond the reach of the law. The use of violence created uncertainty and fear. Such excesses also undermined the appeal of ISIS's governance relative to the regime.

All of these internal issues, if not necessarily sparking the collapse of the caliphate, would at least have resulted in its being substantially weakened. Its overreliance on force, lack of adjustment to local context, and sectarian character eroded popular support and advantaged adversaries, leaving the caliphate even more exposed to external military force. In each of these regards, key features of ISIS's state building could simultaneously be argued to be strengths and weaknesses.

CONCLUSION

This article has demonstrated that ISIS's state building emerged as a response to varying degrees of state failure in both Iraq and Syria. This aligns with Gunaratna's claim that this was key to the caliphate's success.[120] ISIS's state building has tended to be discussed from a legalistic perspective that focuses on questions and themes of statehood, to the detriment of other factors. More generally, this project has often not been analyzed in terms of its political implications, essential to enabling actors like ISIS to enhance their legitimacy and public support. This "stateness" presents a clear challenge to international actors who persist in seeing ISIS, and groups like it, through a counterterrorism lens.

While ISIS is by no means unique in its performance of these state-like functions, both the extent and intention of its state building are unusual. In most other cases, these functions are relatively limited or not carried out with the explicit intention of establishing an alternative political authority. In both respects, ISIS's state building is remarkable and possibly even without parallel. It should be remembered that this state building claimed a universal authority and justification. However, in a more immediate sense, state building enabled ISIS to achieve political goals like gaining public consent by providing stability; challenging and undermining state authority by delivering "Islamic services" in a variety of spheres; and enhancing military strength and capacity. In each regard, state building had a clear justification and intended goal that it worked toward.

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[118] Gilles Kepel, *The Trail of Political Islam* (London: I.B Tauris & Co Ltd, 2009).

[119] Anderson, *Imagined Communities*.

[120] Rohan Gunaratna, "Global Threat Forecast the Rise of ISIS," *Counter Terrorist Trends and Analyses* 10, no.1 (2016): 1-6.

More generally, its focus on the population as part of a military strategy mirrored similar developments elsewhere in the country, where displacement, as a means of drawing in rather than pushing out, emerged as a key part of the conflict.

This suggests a shift of emphasis in which observers no longer focus on the question of whether the caliphate was actually a state; instead, they should consider each activity in isolation, especially in terms of its potential to enhance military strategy and capability. To this extent, far too much attention has been given to ISIS's grand schemes of political and social reconstruction, and not enough to its innovative means. This article shows that four dimensions of ISIS's project merit consideration. Policy actors should consider them in relation to the link between state failure and political extremism, as they have crucial implications for future interventions, both in the region and beyond.

First, state building is a form of stabilization. In the case of Iraq, al-Qaeda in Iraq and then ISIS gained substantially from the heavy-handed and inflexible response of the central government to the insurgency, along with the more general sense of chaos created by the civil war. Identification with ISIS was political insofar as Sunnis broadly concurred with the end goal, even if they ultimately rejected the means through which it was achieved. In the case of Iraq, ISIS failed to learn the lesson of the "awakening" in Anbar, where al-Qaeda in Iraq's use of indiscriminate violence drove a wedge between it and Sunni communities. This was also the case in Syria, where al-Nusra adopted a comparatively more flexible and responsive approach to governance. However, in the case of Iraq, it appears that a harsh judicial system was tolerated on the grounds that it was efficient and more effective than pre-established systems and arrangements.

Second, the ability to extract substantial incomes on a large scale substantially augmented the group's military capacity and enabled it to sustain a force far in excess of those normally possessed by terrorist actors. While ISIS's means of wealth creation were by no means exclusive to it, the extent of its activities and the scale of the wealth it was able to accrue undoubtedly were. It is instructive to note that the enlistment of former Baathist officials made it possible to institutionalize the revenue-generation system in a form that considerably surpassed the capabilities of potential competitors. However, ISIS's revenue generation remained relatively crude insofar as it was dependent on brutal forms of resource extraction. This demonstrated that it had not fully transitioned from insurgency to a modern state. In addition, it remained highly dependent on what was effectively looting, along with extorted ransoms. In the long term, these forms of resource extraction would need to be replaced by sustainable alternatives.

However, there was little evidence of a transition of this kind. Observers inadvertently underscore this when they refer to the diversity of the group's forms of income while failing to acknowledge that a substantial number of these were incompatible with state building. In addition, they also frequently fail to acknowledge that resource extraction in some instances remained rudimentary. In such instances, ISIS's governance failed to fully progress from an insurgency model to a more rational alternative. To take one example, the expulsion of minority groups that were a source of valuable income suggested an inattention to state-building requirements.

Third is the politicization of religion. Any analysis should consider and evaluate theological justifications and innovations in terms of their political significance and purpose. In this regard, it is instructive to consider how often the group has adapted religion, often in a post hoc manner, for political purposes. Of the four different dimensions, politicization of religion is perhaps the one that has been emphasized to the greatest extent. This is unfortunate because, in common with political Islam more generally, the emergence and development of ISIS should primarily be seen as a political development—most specifically as part of the struggle of the wider region to come to terms with the various challenges associated with modernity. In considering the role of religion within ISIS's approach to state building, we are therefore driven to consider its selectivity and even opportunism.

Quite clearly, the use of sectarian divisions for political purposes should be viewed as an extension of the politicization of religion. Indeed, this is the fourth dimension. ISIS's selective use of religion to create a shared sense of belonging has a clear analogy and precedent in nationalism. However, its use of religion to divide and create mutual animosities is the exact opposite of nationalism, which proposes to surmount and overcome difference in the name of the collective good. In this respect, this key aspect of ISIS's state building was rooted in a clear contradiction.

ISIS's pursuit of sectarian objectives, which were rooted in a privileging of ideological priorities over immediate political concerns, acted to the detriment of state building, most notably by driving displacement, which created instability and uncertainty. Sectarianism appeared as the inverse of the proportionality, balance, and focus that are prerequisites for effective state building. While we must acknowledge the importance of external military intervention as a proximate cause in the fall of the caliphate, this article contends that there were a number of weaknesses and contradictions within ISIS's state building that undermined its political ambitions. These can be understood and viewed as structural or internal weaknesses that would have continued to frustrate the consolidation of state authority, even had the caliphate not faced destruction from outside.

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