



Islamic Theology of Counter Terrorism  
اسلام کے تقابلیاتی اور کاونٹر ٹیرور ازم

# An Account of Fact & Fiction Regarding ISIS Governance

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## WHAT IS ISIS

- *Sociopsychology*
- *Radicalisation*
- *Ideology*
- *Propaganda*

## LIFE UNDER ISIS

- *Governance*
- *Functioning Society*
- *Shariah Law*
- *Genocide*

## INTRODUCTION

The strategies for challenging or opposing terrorist organizations generally fall within one of four categories: kinetic aspects, endurance of society, narrative, and legitimacy.<sup>1</sup> One of the most prominent terrorist threats currently is the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria, or ISIS (also known as IS, ISIL, and Daesh). The primary opposition to ISIS thus far has been kinetic; consequently, this paper will address the intersection of the latter three categories. A critical assessment of ISIS' past performance in Mosul and Raqqa provides a strong challenge to the plausibility of the promised future caliphate (the "idea of leadership which is about the just ordering of Muslim society according to the will of God") and a systematic examination of the group's ideology shows that it is inconsistent, hypocritical, and does not represent the actual conduct of governance under ISIS.<sup>2</sup>

Though ISIS has been pushed out of its territorial strongholds of Mosul and Raqqa, it is far from gone. "We have not defeated the idea," [Major General Michael K. Nakata] is reported to have said. "We do not even understand the idea."<sup>3</sup> Yet the US government needs to understand both the idea and the reality if we are to truly eliminate this threat.

ISIS has a history of rebranding failed operations as successes through propaganda. ISIS has frequently already manipulated history and Quranic law (as will be explored later in the discussion of their interpretation of *sharia*<sup>a</sup> law), and their defeat in Mosul and Raqqa will likely be retooled as well. For instance, a fire caused by a failed bomb in London last September was championed as one of multiple bombs that had been planted in London, causing the media to shift their story from a failed terrorist attack to the capability ISIS had to attack western countries.<sup>4</sup> Lone wolf attackers are rebranded as "soldiers of the caliphate," and each attack—successful or failed—can be utilized by ISIS to act as a reminder of their potential.<sup>5</sup> Territorial defeat does not mean ISIS is gone, far from it. Current ISIS generated media attention focuses not only on nostalgia for a time when Sunni Muslims were rulers, but also calls on speeches from previous leaders who have led ISIS out of darker moments.<sup>6</sup>

ISIS' massive internet presence and social media strategy has meant that foreign fighters are largely being recruited online. Yet counter-radicalization and deradicalization programs focused on individuals being targeted by ISIS electronically are still few and far between.

Establishing a legitimate counter narrative may help prevent radicalization, particularly if a campaign to promote the counter narrative is aimed at those who might become ISIS supporters or even recruits. As has been illustrated in scientific journals,

Neuroscience research shows that human beings construct and update memories with available information at the time of retrieval. What this means is that the persistent dissemination of ISIS nostalgia narratives uncontested in the information theater may lead to individual and collective memories of the past being reconstructed in ways that reflect ISIS' retelling of that history. The legacy ISIS should be remembered for is the one it has wrought in Iraq and Syria.<sup>7</sup>

Rewriting the narrative of life under ISIS perpetuated by the group is axiomatic to its ultimate defeat. The current ISIS narrative promises rewards both presently and after death for its fighters. It indicates that all who live in its territory (who are Sunni Muslims) will have an idyllic existence, following *sharia* law, and will want for nothing. In this paper I will examine how ISIS recruits and what it claims life will be like in its universal caliphate. I will then break down these claims, and illustrate the importance of creating a factual counter narrative to prevent future radicalization.

## **WHAT IS ISIS?**

ISIS is a fundamentalist, Salafi, Sunni organization. Practitioners of Islam can overall be divided into Shia and Sunni, due to a disagreement millennium ago over who was meant to be Mohammad's successor. Salafism is a very conservative branch of Sunni Islam. Within Salafism, only a minority of practitioners are jihadists—and it is members of this group that compose ISIS. They view all those who do not conform to their specific brand of Islam as heretics and infidels, and thus enemies who must be defeated to create their caliphate. As a Sunni organization, they also build on the recent legacy of violence against Sunnis in Iraq in the wake of former Iraqi president Saddam Hussein's leadership to stoke sectarian divisions and recruit members.

While ISIS is not one coherent and unified creature, it does have, according to its leaders and its self-published material, general goals and characteristics that make its followers a somewhat unified threat. Why? Because its followers, not to be confused with those subjected to forced membership, are not content to merely practice their own beliefs, but determined to enslave or kill all people until they have made their beliefs a universal rule of law. While in the west this poses less of an immediate threat—though of course terrorist attacks over the past few years illustrate that ISIS' ideology is still

deadly—in the Middle East and other areas where ISIS followers have managed to congregate (including parts of Africa and the Philippines) all civilians are at risk of recruitment or attack.

Despite messaging, it is certainly possible that at least some of the leaders of ISIS do not believe in the Quranic law or utopic caliphate they claim to fight for. One defector directly said “They say there is a state, but in fact there is no Islamic State...They are making fun of you...Please don’t follow the Islamic state. They are unbelievers.”<sup>8</sup> This boy, who was only *thirteen years old* when he joined ISIS, did so out of religious conviction, and he is not alone in doing so.<sup>9</sup>

ISIS is part of a millenarian movement, which, broadly, is a movement that believes in a coming apocalypse as a first step towards creating a new world order brought on by a divine power. This new society is meant to be a return to the “utopia” of past centuries.<sup>10</sup> Both ISIS’ strict adherence to Quranic law and ban on modern technologies illustrate their devotion to such beliefs. One illustration of ISIS’ interpretation of a utopian age is its rejection of modern calendars. Journalist John Vilanova has claimed: “‘Modern’ is a pejorative term within the group, Gregorian (Miladi) dating is rejected in favor of the Islamic lunar calendar...”<sup>11</sup> Additionally, ISIS is an offshoot of al Qaeda. While western audiences primarily view them as a terrorist group, their territorial ambitions and accomplishments mean they must also be considered to be insurgents, and addressed through means aimed at countering both their terrorist and insurgent ambitions.

ISIS claims that it aims to create a universal caliphate of believers, with the rest of the world being collateral damage in this mission. There can be no negotiation and ISIS has no interest in joining the global community. They have no desire to be represented at the United Nations (UN). British Islamist activist Abu Baraa said: “This is not permitted... To send an ambassador to the UN is to recognize an authority other than God’s.”<sup>12</sup> ISIS simply refuses to accept the sovereignty of nation states; it does not wish to negotiate with them, but to conquer them.

In its drive for dominance, ISIS seeks war. They want Western countries to fight so that they can ultimately eliminate all enemies. Bringing the fight to western countries, in ISIS mythology, can begin the apocalypse that they await.<sup>13</sup> Their fighters do not care how long it takes, and they are willing to wait and to die, secure in the knowledge that, as Adnani stated, “[they] are always and forever victorious, since the battle of Noah and until Allah inherits the earth and those upon it...”

We will conquer your Rome, break your crosses, and enslave your women. If we do not reach that time, then our children and grandchildren will reach it.”<sup>14</sup>

ISIS’ message and successes have led to a “multitude of affiliate groups, or ‘provinces,’ across Africa, the Middle East, and Asia.”<sup>15</sup> Between 20,000 and 40,000 foreign fighters went to Syria and Iraq to fight with ISIS between 2014-2017.<sup>16</sup> ISIS has conducted attacks in Egypt, sent fighters to Libya and recruited there, co-opted local militant groups like Boko Haram (which pledged allegiance to ISIS) in Nigeria, and prolonged battles in the Philippines (including a month’s long battle over the city of Marawi).<sup>17</sup> Though many members have since died or returned home, this mobilization speaks to the highly effective use of social media by ISIS. Even without physical territory, it is able to spread its message and ideals digitally to recruit and mobilize supporters. ISIS has created a global movement and message, such that mere territorial defeat is not nearly enough to stop them.

## **SOCIOPSYCHOLOGY AND RADICALIZATION**

To address the appeal of ISIS, and the potential power of a counter narrative, we need to understand better the broader motivations for joining terrorist groups.

According to psychologists, two basic human needs include “the need for *cognitive closure* and the need for *personal significance*.”<sup>18</sup> ISIS is able to cleverly exploit these needs to gain recruits.

Specifically, the instability in the Middle East, as exemplified by unemployment, unresponsive or authoritarian governments, a lack of social services, and more, has led to increased uncertainty and desire for autonomy and meaning among many of the region’s citizens.<sup>19</sup> The seemingly never-ending chaos creates groups of people who are more vulnerable to extremist narratives, so long as they provide actions that can be taken and reasons for what has been occurring. Fundamentalism can be a very appealing narrative in this context as “[it creates] a world of good versus evil, saints versus sinners, order versus chaos; a pure universe in black and white admitting no shades of gray. A fundamentalist ideology establishes clear contingencies between actions and consequences; it offers a future that is predictable and controllable.”<sup>20</sup>

Thus, ISIS is able to tap into people’s desire for personal significance through strategic essentialism, and provide an obvious path without fear of nuance.

Islamist movements can be compelling for those who feel lost “because they provide simplistic, pre-packaged explanations of past events and contemporary conditions and incorporate ideas, texts, and interpretations derived from Islamic sources, namely the Quran, *hadith* and Muslim history.”<sup>21</sup> It is not only citizens of the Mideast who are vulnerable to ISIS’ narratives, and there is no one profile of those who join groups like ISIS. In a study of 677 of the more than 800 Germans who traveled to Syria to fight, “Race, country of origin, gender, age, relationship status, educational background or prior criminal involvement are of such a diversity that no universally accepted common denominator could be deduced,” though the majority were teenagers and young adults.<sup>22</sup> A history of personal victimization, socio-economic difficulties, or wider historical grievances can all be factors in why an individual might turn to an Islamist movement.<sup>23</sup>

Out of the vast swathe of Islamist extremist movements to which the discontented can turn to vent their struggles, why are so many going to ISIS? It’s simple: ISIS is the Islamist extremist movement that is most readily available. They are the first terrorist group to establish a massive online presence and produce enough professional videos that they could recruit 30,000 people from beyond their territory to travel to Syria and Iraq.

This is largely due to the narrative that ISIS has created through one of its media arms, Al Hayat (the other three are al Furqan, al Itisam, and Ajnad).<sup>24</sup> Broadly speaking, ISIS’ propaganda highlights its promises of governance, justice, and development, while using European languages and slick marketing and video skills. Further, in its call to action it highlights the negative qualities of its enemies and suggests that joining ISIS will bring its followers rewards and justice.<sup>25</sup>

ISIS recruiters typically utilize three steps in the radicalization process: grievance, narrative, and mobilization.<sup>26</sup> Teenagers and young adults have a particular tendency to question both authority figures and peers with whom they had previously agreed.<sup>27</sup> It can be easy take advantage of the discontent or alienation they might feel, particularly due to perceived or actual prejudice against Muslims. Their discontent can be adopted into an “us versus them” mentality.<sup>28</sup> This group of potential youthful recruits are, due to their age and social development or lack thereof, vulnerable and often looking for support and a foundation on which to build their burgeoning adult selves.<sup>29</sup>

Groups like ISIS can give those who feel lost a “true purpose” and a sense of belonging to a community.<sup>30</sup> In ISIS’ narrative, their fighters are heroes and martyrs who have earned a place in history due to their fight against the evils of the west. For those who have experienced loss or dissatisfaction, ISIS provides a secure path to “mattering.”<sup>31</sup> Their war is a cause much larger than any individual person.

That said, there are personal, immediate rewards to joining ISIS as well. Specifically, male fighters are offered sex. Women and girls are “given” or “gifted” to these fighters as rewards. Particularly in parts of the world where masculinity is defined by marital status, the desire for a bride can be a powerful incentive.<sup>32</sup> ISIS fighters are paid high salaries, and told that after fighting for a year they can live anywhere in the caliphate.<sup>33</sup> Potential martyrs are also told that the act of martyrdom is so important that it can balance out any past negative deeds and ensure them a place in heaven.<sup>34</sup> This is of course not to mention the promise of virgins and an eternity in heaven once one is martyred for the cause.

While other Islamist extremist movements exist, ISIS has marketed itself as a brand and a promise. It has an extensive advertising campaign that preys on Muslims who feel disenfranchised. It promises a “utopian and just Islamic ‘Caliphate,’ and a path to justice for Muslims who feel disenfranchised, marginalized, discriminated against and fearful of their own governments, as well as under attack from the West.”<sup>35</sup> Joining ISIS gives these individuals a purpose and a place of belonging, while identifying the cause of their suffering thus far.

Are there people who join ISIS out of a desire to commit violence, to destroy sacred sites and rape women? Undoubtedly. But there are also many who join because they have seen a world in which Muslims are discriminated against, and they are promised a paradise in which that is no longer true.

Additionally, there are those who join ISIS once it has taken control of their city or town, out of fear of death or torture, or to be able to provide food for their families. Those who are forced to join in circumstances like these are not the subject of this paper.

## **WHAT ISIS CLAIMS**

The internet is the ideal method of dissemination for ISIS’ propaganda. Philosopher and social theorist Michel Foucault argued that within an institution, power is not solely a top-down entity:



it is networked, and it is based around knowledge or narrative structures.<sup>36</sup> This is precisely the way narratives spread throughout the internet. The massive dissemination of the narratives that ISIS specifically creates can quickly and easily reach millions of discontented youth. It is difficult to precisely define, for ISIS, the boundary between religion, governance, and battlefield events, and they are able to conflate religion and violence in their propaganda.<sup>37</sup>

ISIS propaganda, including professionally produced videos and magazines as well as personal one-on-one conversations with recruiters, paints a romanticized image of life under ISIS.<sup>38</sup> The broad narrative is framed as a crusade—not just against the west, but against any and all who do not support ISIS’ version of Islam.<sup>39</sup> Propaganda videos by ISIS have the feel of blockbuster films, and some are narrated in a variety of languages and accents to illustrate its broad reach and appeal.<sup>40</sup>

The form of Islam preached under ISIS is typically not critical to attracting its recruits, many of whom have only a basic understanding of the religion, let alone ISIS’ specific reading of sacred texts. Sayyid Qutb, a deceased Islamist theorist and leader of the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood, was one of the first radical Salafis to create an argument for universal jihad—one that ISIS has adopted.

[He] argued that force was necessary to remove the chains of oppression so that Islamic truth could predominate. Ever more importantly, because the rulers in the Muslim world used non-Islamic legal codes, they were part of the modern *jhailiyya* [period of ignorance] and therefore not real Muslims. As infidels, they could be fought and removed from power, because the primary objective of Muslims is to establish God’s rule on earth.<sup>41</sup>

Qutb’s thinking, which has been adopted by many Islamist jihadi groups, emphasizes what jihadis refer to as “the neglected duty”—the essential duty of striking down all those who are apostates, including those who consider themselves Muslim, but do not follow the extreme and isolated form of Islam the group in question believes in.<sup>42</sup>

ISIS portrays themselves in their materials as liberators and saviors. This is critical in building support. ISIS promotes their tangible plans for a caliphate and their ideological plans for domination in a way that creates “mutually reinforcing narrative cycles, whereby the veracity of IS’s system of meaning is evidenced in the efficacy of its politico-military apparatus (and vice versa).”<sup>43</sup> This set of both pragmatic and ideological factors creates the perception of ISIS as both the organization that champions Sunni Muslims, and the organization that has the capability to do so.

Despite their self-appointed role as champions of Islam, ISIS' recruits often see a different version of Islam than the one that ISIS perpetuates. One German woman described her conversion to Islam as being due to the way people cared for each other and helped those in need.<sup>44</sup> Often these converts and western recruits see themselves as part of a righteous fight against a racist and oppressive system.<sup>45</sup> By being vague at times, and providing one-on-one recruiters to answer any questions of possible recruits, ISIS is able to attract a wider range of people who can apply ISIS' logic as they understand it to their own experiences.

One of the aspects ISIS capitalizes on is the sense of anger and disenfranchisement that many people feel, and ISIS gives those people an enemy on whom they can pin all their grievances. ISIS narratives take highly complex issues and boil them into an in-group and out-group: Sunni Muslims and Others.<sup>46</sup> This presented the Others as “responsible for Sunni perceptions of crisis, and thus presents IS as the sole bearer of the solution to the lethal malaise facing Sunnis.”<sup>47</sup> This is a narrative that can certainly be countered: as will be discussed later, ISIS frequently kills Sunni Muslims, and even enslaves Sunni Muslim women.<sup>48</sup> They do not protect those whom they claim to champion.

ISIS has made numerous promises to those who join including free furnished housing for all foreign recruits.<sup>49</sup> There is a suggested sense of community in the images selected by ISIS to be used in one of its magazines, *Dabiq*. Often these images show groups of Muslim men praying together. These are meant to imply the idyllic nature of the caliphate under *sharia* law, as the “only place where Muslims can truly lead happy and fulfilled lives.”<sup>50</sup> These images are juxtaposed with images of dead Sunni Muslims, often babies and young children, to gain sympathy and understanding of why they must fight.<sup>51</sup> This is further tied in with a common theme of brotherhood—that all Sunni Muslims are brothers and an attack against one is an attack against all.<sup>52</sup>

For the idealistic, disenfranchised young men (who make up the majority of foreign recruits), being promised a home, a bride (which, again, is tied to achieving manhood in many cultures), and a purpose is critical. ISIS explains that the socio-economic troubles, lack of job opportunities, and political corruption that these men may have experienced in the past are all the fault of the west, and by joining ISIS and creating a caliphate these problems will no longer exist.<sup>53</sup>

That is not to say that all ISIS propaganda focuses on forward-thinking, positive elements. Numerous videos of graphic beheadings, burnings, drownings, and other violence have been circulated as well. It is critical to remember that part of the message of ISIS is genocide. These videos illustrate (according to ISIS) what happens to all those who oppose them.<sup>54</sup> Some young recruits feel that ISIS' brutality makes it "more authentic" than groups like al Qaeda.<sup>55</sup> There are no attempts to justify the bloodshed and mass enslavement of minorities, including the Yazidi, because in its ideology ISIS does not believe this requires a moral justification. The response is simply "One should remember that enslaving the families of the *kuffar*—the infidels—and taking their women as concubines is a firmly established aspect of the *Shariah*, or Islamic law."<sup>56</sup> In their as-yet- unrealized caliphate, all who are Sunni Muslims will be in heaven, and all those who are not will be enslaved or killed, and that is as it should be. The violence both demonstrates their power and capability, and their intended revenge on the west.

Even as ISIS faces the loss of its territory in Iraq and Syria, their media changes its approach to illustrate that they are still capable of fighting. After its territorial defeats, *Dabiq* and *Rumiyah* (another ISIS-produced magazine) propaganda began focusing on struggle and sacrifice, a need to "purify the ranks," and a call for unconventional politico- military activity.<sup>57</sup> These accounts suggest that if ISIS members and recruits stay true to their mission and are willing to sacrifice their lives, the caliphate can still be realized.

Challenging their narrative and illustrating that the defeats in Mosul and Raqqa are indicative of its inability to govern or maintain control over a territory remains as important in illustrating the falseness of ISIS' narrative as ever.

## **GOVERNANCE: IS ISIS A STATE?**

ISIS argues that it is indeed a state. In the eighth issue of *Dabiq*, ISIS forced journalist and hostage John Cantlie to argue that ISIS should be viewed as a state. He writes:

I am certainly no expert on such matters and my views are those of a layman, but generally one doesn't expect a mere "organization" to lay siege to cities or have their own police force. You certainly don't expect a mere "organization" to have tanks and artillery pieces, an army of soldiers' tens of thousands strong, and their own spy drones. And one certainly doesn't expect a mere "organization" to have a mint with plans to produce their own currency, primary schools for the young, and a functioning court system.

These, surely, are all hallmarks of (whisper it if you dare) a country.<sup>58</sup>

Though ISIS claims that in the long term they will control a caliphate without borders, their desire for immediate power and legitimacy is illustrated in their aims to be accepted as a state. Further, if ISIS claims, as it has, that its territory is part of the universal caliphate, that it in fact *has* created a Muslim state, then we may evaluate its ability to function as a state.

Before examining life in ISIS controlled territories, we need a framework from which to discuss the various aspects of ISIS governance. What does it mean for ISIS to be in control? What activities and necessities would ISIS need to control in their vision of a universal caliphate? According to the UN, good governance includes participation, consensus, accountability, transparency, responsiveness, effectiveness, equity, and rule of law.<sup>59</sup> There has been only limited study of insurgent and armed group governance. But understanding ISIS governance is critical to understanding the long-term viability of the organization. Essentially, how well can ISIS as a non-state armed group regulate life within a defined territory? This examination of governance includes not only the provision of security, goods, and social control, but also the rules and practices that the insurgents adopt.<sup>60</sup> We can also return to early seminal thinkers John Locke and Thomas Hobbes: is governance that which separates society from the state of nature? The enforcement of the contract we have all implicitly agreed to in order to live in civilization? These theories at the very least suggest that which seems implicit in many of these other arguments: that humans need rule of law in order to exist as a civilization.

If we try to find the common threads between these ideas, taking into account the context of modern life (i.e. the interdependence that people and nations largely have on one another), we could suggest that governance entails certain aspects of governing: rule of law, economic stability, basic infrastructure, health services, and education. If ISIS were to succeed in its creation of a universal caliphate, it would need to establish all of these successfully. Functioning governance is particularly critical in new and developing states.

Low levels of education and access to health care are both strongly linked to negative development.<sup>61</sup> In countries including India, South Korea, and Taiwan increased access to health care and education led to growth and improved societal well-being.<sup>62</sup>

These fundamentals of state building are not appropriately addressed by ISIS, despite their promises. It is also important to note that functioning and good governance are not necessarily the same, and ISIS should be evaluated under both criteria. “Good” governance implies an ethical or moral basis, while functioning governance is more related to effectiveness. A brutal authoritarian government can be very effective at providing the basic aspects of governance, while a progressive democratic one can have high hopes and fail at this. This distinction presents us with several different ways to address ISIS governance: first, as effective or ineffective; second, as “ethical” or not ethical to a western, democratic audience; third, as “ethical” when compared to the system of rules it claims to follow in the Quran.

To address all three of these, we must understand the ISIS system of governing, one based on a constitution-like text allegedly drafted by the Prophet himself to govern the city of Medina in the year 622.<sup>63</sup> Those living in ISIS territory are subjected to government based on a system from the seventh century and ally themselves with ISIS through taxes or military service, or face death by beheading or stoning (or other creative methods).<sup>64</sup>

The “Caliph” or Commander in Chief of ISIS is Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi. He has two chief deputies who oversaw operations in ISIS territory in Iraq and Syria. These three men, as well as a group of trusted advisors, compose the executive branch of the caliphate.

Underneath each deputy are twelve governors and ministries who oversee daily governing functions.<sup>65</sup>

According to the Counter Extremism Project, these ministries are as follows:

- Financial Council: ISIS’s treasury, which oversees oil and weapons sales and other revenue.
- Leadership Council: responsible for the organization’s laws and policies. The council’s decisions are approved by Baghdadi. The council also has the authority to depose al-Baghdadi if he strays from ISIS’s ideology.
- Military Council: responsible for the organization’s military operations.
- Legal Council: responsible for decisions on executions and recruitment. It also handles family disputes and religious transgressions.
- Fighters Assistance Council: responsible for providing aid and housing to foreign fighters who come to ISIS’s territory, including moving them into and out of the territory.
- Security Council: responsible for police and security oversight of ISIS’s territory. It also carries out executions.
- Intelligence Council: ISIS’s intelligence-gathering wing.

- Media Council: manages ISIS’s media strategy, including social media.<sup>66</sup>

The legislative branch includes the *shura* council (religious doctrine and communicating Baghdadi’s wishes throughout the organization) and the *sharia* council (enforces its interpretation of *sharia*).<sup>67</sup>

ISIS’ adherence to an “early version of Islam” allows ISIS members to participate in *takfiri* (excommunication) practices—that is, they claim the right to label other Muslims, to whom they object, as “unbelievers” and exterminate all those who do not adhere to their own extremist ideology.

According to ISIS defectors, anyone who does not follow their extremist ideology is labeled *murtad* (a Muslim renegade), infidel, or *kafir* (unbelievers)—categories of people that, according to ISIS, can be killed with impunity.<sup>68</sup> According to defectors, this also meant “that if a fighter didn’t like a local person they could make a false accusation and order the person into *Shariah* court, or have them immediately punished, or even killed.”<sup>69</sup> While in their propaganda ISIS proclaims that punishment is meted out according to religious laws, regardless of the whims of man, it is clear that this is not the case in practice. From the beginning, we can begin to see that ISIS did not create an “ethical” society according to its own ideology.

ISIS governance is not entirely ineffective. One group of its recruits are Ba’athists who served previously as bureaucrats under Saddam Hussein in Iraq.<sup>70</sup> They have history working with security schemes, particularly, under Saddam, a multitude of programs that were to keep him from being killed or overthrown.<sup>71</sup> They bring these organizational skills into ISIS bureaucracy. ISIS immediately put civil servants in Mosul back to work, “fixing potholes, painting crosswalks, repairing power lines and overseeing payroll.”<sup>72</sup> They even streamlined a process for applicants who wanted to rent government land to farm, shortening it from a week to an afternoon.<sup>73</sup> They built a new road to connect parts of Mosul, and their terrifying punishments inspired the street cleaners to hasten their work.<sup>74</sup> They did initially provide more consistent electricity in Mosul than the Iraqi government had ever managed—though this soon changed.<sup>75</sup>

In Raqqa, ISIS established a Public Service Department to oversee public utilities, including water and power.<sup>76</sup> To address regional insecurity, ISIS had a public security department (“to safeguard the Muslims’ way of life – as interpreted by Daesh – and to detect infiltrators from the Shia and other intelligence services”), the army department (regional security), and the police department

(establishes checkpoints and sends out patrols).<sup>77</sup> The judiciary court and public complaint department responded to issues in *sharia* courts. Religious regulations were further enforced by the *Hisba* department (follow *sharia* law) and the *Dawah* donation and mosque department (religious teaching).<sup>78</sup>

ISIS had also created an education department and health department, as well as an agriculture and irrigation department in both Iraq and Syria. This last department not only oversaw farming, distribution of goods, irrigation work, but also attempted to make positive public announcements to uphold its image.<sup>79</sup> In general, ISIS strove to illustrate that their governance was more efficient than that of the Iraqi or Syrian governments.<sup>80</sup>

## **LIFE UNDER ISIS: GOVERNANCE**

ISIS began its territorial claims with actions that indicate a desire to actually govern, but quickly changed from provider to punisher. While their narrative suggests durable government solutions, in reality this has not been the case. Yet so long as ISIS governance is (or appears to be) more effective than the previous government's, they are able to maintain a degree of legitimacy.<sup>81</sup> Its immediate entrenchment in services including police and basic maintenance (which was often sorely lacking before ISIS' arrival) made it more difficult and less desirable to remove ISIS. In its early days, its security forces cracked down on crime, creating the perception that it was providing residents with increased protection.<sup>82</sup> These services were initially free, but later paid for by increasingly burdensome taxes.<sup>83</sup>

ISIS took control of Raqqa and Mosul during the early summer of 2014. It attempted to create entirely new states, calling these two areas the beginning of its universal caliphate. In Mosul, residents were initially welcoming towards ISIS. "Under their rule, traffic across Mosul eased as blast walls were removed, security improved, and for a while, services such as electricity, water and street-cleaning were better than they had been when the Iraqi government was in control."<sup>84</sup> The Iraqi army had been brutal, and at first, it seemed that ISIS was not. In Raqqa, residents were wary early. They had celebrated the victory of the Free Syrian Army, but as those fighters left to fight elsewhere, ISIS began to take over, and they were not welcomed.<sup>85</sup>



effective way of forcing street cleaners to do their jobs and frightening potential thieves, it also meant that civilians were kept under similar autocratic conditions. Women were not allowed outside without a *niqab* and a guardian, for instance. Impacts on education and health care will be discussed later.

There are two aspects of the economy to review as well. One is the financing of ISIS, the other is the economic stability of the populace. These could not have been more different. ISIS has a diversified revenue stream. From their new territories, they gained millions of dollars in agriculture and taxes.<sup>86</sup> They taxed the land they stole, they taxed the harvest, they taxed supermarkets and shops, they taxed for garbage collection and electricity and water and created tolls.<sup>87</sup> As mentioned previously, services that locals were at first grateful for, and which were initially provided free, came at an increasingly high cost.

ISIS enforced *zakat*, a historical religious tax. ISIS established a separate *Zakat* Department to collect taxes from everyone, ostensibly to be “distributed to those in need including poor Muslims, new converts to Islam, the Islamic clergy, those fighting for Islamic causes, and others.”<sup>88</sup> They like to portray themselves as Robin Hood: “In our state, the Islamic State, there are no poor and no needy because *zakat* is taken from the rich and given to the poor.”<sup>89</sup> This is less than truthful. Members of ISIS lived lavishly in houses they did not need to pay for while levels of starvation and unemployment skyrocketed among the populations they controlled.<sup>90</sup> In their publications, ISIS advertised images of their members distributing charity in Aleppo, and articles had titles such as “Caring for the Orphans.”<sup>91</sup> Given the reality faced by civilians, these are claims that can be directly disproven. While foreign fighters were given furnished apartments, most people could barely afford to feed their families. The promised utopia was a city of hunger and constant corporal punishment.

## **LIFE UNDER ISIS: FUNCTIONING SOCIETY?**

While ISIS’ claims that it will create a universal caliphate both implicitly and explicitly imply a functioning society under their reign, this has not been the case. Early steps to maintain total control and provision of services at first suggested that they would be successful in this goal. However, over time civilians in the territories under their rule lacked basic amenities, were forced to pay increasingly high taxes, and lived in constant fear for their lives due to changing rules and reckless executions.

Endurance of society (or lack thereof), as mentioned previously, is one of the characteristics used to assist in dismantling a terrorist organization. The complete dysfunction of society under ISIS rule indicates that its narrative is false.

According to ISIS defectors, ISIS attempts “to quickly gain control of all the economic and social infrastructures in an area—making it difficult to resist—thereby forcing the inhabitants to join in order to survive, even to literally obtain food.”<sup>92</sup> They do this in all the territory they take. Often they have sent ahead a few trusted fighters to gain the support of or blackmail influential townspeople.<sup>93</sup> In the early stages of seizing control, one tactic used by ISIS was putting “suicide belts” on small children and sending them into populated areas, so that when civilians realized what was happening they were afraid to confront anyone for fear of killing children or groups of people.<sup>94</sup> This method is a far cry from ISIS propaganda that illustrates fighters as mighty warriors on a holy mission.

One of the first departments to be set up in Mosul was the Ministry of War Spoils. This ministry seized every single piece of land and property owned by families who were not Sunni Muslims.<sup>95</sup> These properties were given to ISIS fighters as rewards, allowing them to live rent-free.

ISIS forbade male doctors to treat women, but did not assist in finding an alternative, leaving women who knew no other doctors untreated.<sup>96</sup> Though they set up hospitals, these quickly filled up with ISIS fighters, who were the priority, and left no room for civilians.<sup>97</sup> Overall, the health care system was severely lacking in resources.<sup>98</sup>

After taking Mosul, ISIS instituted new rules for those at Mosul University. Teachers could not acknowledge the Republic of Iraq or Ministry of Education, only ISIS and *Diwan al-Ta'aleem* (ISIS' education department).<sup>99</sup> Male and female teachers and students were separated. ISIS closed the human rights, political sciences, and fine arts colleges, as well as the departments of archaeology, physical education, philosophy, and tourism and subjects including democracy, culture, freedom, rights, and English and French fiction and theater.<sup>100</sup> These were essentially the same conditions as in Raqqa. Teachers also had to undergo “repentance” (repenting their “sins” and pledging themselves to ISIS).<sup>101</sup> They principally taught *sharia*, Arabic, state loyalty, and what happens to those are not loyal, with some math and science on occasion.<sup>102</sup>

Though Baghdadi initially said that ISIS would spare Iraqi police and security service members if they asked forgiveness, they were killed, from management down to traffic officers.<sup>103</sup> Another promise ISIS made about how it would run the caliphate, which was quickly disproven, was that Christians would be allowed limited minority rights (not allowed to construct or repair churches, or pray outside of them, for instance) in return for an additional tax. Christians were not given such rights even when they were not outright killed. Members of other religions were to be enslaved or killed.<sup>104</sup>

The economies of Mosul and Raqqa were destroyed under ISIS rule. Under ISIS control, approximately one-third of the population in their territories fled and those remaining were under such strict rules that factories closed and fields dried up.<sup>105</sup> Despite maintaining control of oil fields that could provide energy, “In Syria, more than 60 percent of the lights went dark as ISIS struggled to restore electricity or fuel generators. In Iraq, it was more like 80 percent.”<sup>106</sup> Civil servants went without pay, and those who had little money to begin with spent the period of occupation slowly selling their possessions to buy food.<sup>107</sup> Businesses like hair salons were forced to close so as not to encourage “debauchery,” and those who would not join ISIS were not allowed to find new work.<sup>108</sup> Though in its propaganda ISIS liked to illustrate bustling markets in its cities, the goods there were so expensive that only ISIS militants could afford them—including basic essentials and foodstuffs.<sup>109</sup>

## **LIFE UNDER ISIS: SHARIA LAW**

One of ISIS central claims is its enforcement of *sharia* law. Its goal is to create a universal Muslim state under the auspices of traditional Muslim society. But its actions do not support its claims of being guided by Islam and the Quran alone. Once again, the reality of life under ISIS directly contradicts the legitimacy of their narrative.

*Sharia* law, as mentioned before, was harshly though not uniformly enforced. Men were not allowed to shave or trim their beards, and their pants had to end just above the ankle. Women had to wear a full *niqab*. Those who failed to follow these rules would be fined or worse.<sup>110</sup> According to prison records: “Citizens were thrown into jail for a litany of obscure crimes, including eyebrow plucking, inappropriate haircuts, raising pigeons, playing dominoes, playing cards, playing music and smoking the hookah.”<sup>111</sup> Yet ISIS fighters did not have to swear off consumption of western goods, and

had been seen enjoying various western imports.<sup>112</sup> The promise of marriage is a strong inducement for many recruits; thus ISIS widows do not follow the *sharia* practice of *iddah* (waiting four months and ten days before she can remarry to ensure she was not pregnant).<sup>113</sup> They are expected to immediately be married again as a reward for other ISIS members. Defectors from ISIS also reported that some among their fellow fighters were known to be rapists, but were never punished.<sup>114</sup>

The legal office in Raqqa was quickly closed after ISIS announced that “disputes would now be handled according to God’s law alone.”<sup>115</sup> The “judicial” council that was set up served solely to determine disputes through the interpretation of *sharia*, not secular law. Technically, this set of laws extends to ISIS fighters as well—and there is even ostensibly a possible impeachment process for the caliph—to buoy the legitimacy of the government.<sup>116</sup> Yet, naturally, punishments are different for different people. When an ISIS fighter was found guilty of “a homosexual act,” he was lashed. When two civilians were found guilty of the same crime, they were thrown from the roof of a building.<sup>117</sup>

ISIS set up several policing forces to enforce compliance with *sharia* law. One was *hisba*, the “morality” police.<sup>118</sup> Rules to be enforced by the *hisba* became more severe as time went on with ISIS posting new ones in the market or on city walls. Typical rules included mandatory guardians for women, strict dress codes, a ban on smoking, harsh punishments for trying to leave the caliphate, and close observation of any use of the internet. One woman said, “One day, talking to a male shopkeeper was okay; the next you had to ask your male escort, a family member, to do it for you.”<sup>119</sup> Anyone not following the rules ISIS had created was punished with fines, lashing, reeducation, or death, depending on their crime. Reeducation involved attending courses in *sharia* and getting a receipt, when ISIS police were satisfied the person in question fully understood ISIS’ version of *sharia*, that said “this person has repented.”<sup>120</sup> This form of religious education is likely not quite what the devout Muslims who joined ISIS imagined, and is in fact an excellent example of the kind of counter-narrative that can be produced to pushback against ISIS: the group does not teach true Islam; rather, it teaches people to obey its leaders.

In Raqqa, ISIS militants quickly began carrying out brutal punishments in roundabouts and forcing public gatherings for executions.<sup>121</sup> One man who had been active in the revolution in Syria in 2011, but was no longer, was crucified and beheaded, his body and head stationed in front of his

mother's house.<sup>122</sup> Some of the killings were given reasons: that the condemned were “apostates” in one way or another. Others were clearly revenge. One unhappy, isolated man joined ISIS and told them his mother didn't support the group, then offered to (and did) execute her in public himself.<sup>123</sup> Crucifixions, stoning, and beheadings became common. Sometimes ISIS forced children to carry out the sentence.<sup>124</sup> Dead bodies were hung from lampposts or bridges to warn others what would happen if ISIS grew unhappy.<sup>125</sup>

Though ISIS claims there are, somehow, acceptable reasons under Islam to have slaves who are not Muslim, in reality they also take female slaves that are Sunni and Shia. These women were often the wives of defeated enemy soldiers.<sup>126</sup> They make no Quranic arguments as to the validity of Sunni Muslim slaves. Again, these are powerful images for an information campaign against ISIS, illustrating how little they care for following Islam. They do not even abide by their own prescribed rules (putting aside how horrible those rules are), as evidenced by their making Sunni women into slaves and killing civilians for revenge and displaying their bodies in the streets.

## **LIFE UNDER ISIS: GENOCIDE**

Though, as mentioned previously, there are those who join ISIS out of a desire to commit atrocities, there are many who joined out of Islamic faith and belief in a possible better world. Defectors have described the cruel pleasure taken by those ISIS fighters who torture and execute civilians. The extreme brutality caused them to realize that ISIS was not following Islam, and to turn away from the organization. One particular example of how ISIS carries out mass slaughter that could be used as a compelling counter narrative begins with a genocide on August 3, 2014.

The Yazidi, a historically persecuted people and an identifiable, unified group that ISIS has sought to eliminate serves as a compelling example of ISIS' unending brutality. 85 percent of the Yazidi population has been displaced since 2014. Prior to ISIS, the Yazidi population was as low as 700,000 people.<sup>127</sup>

I have personally heard the stories of captivity while working at the Yazidi nonprofit Yazda in Dohuk in 2017. I was told of a child who watched an ISIS soldier squeeze a baby's head until its eyeball popped out. The soldier made all the children touch the eyeball. A mother who escaped has a daughter who remains in captivity.

Her daughter is blonde and blue-eyed, and she is promised to an ISIS captain: she is four years old. Many women had endured such horrors that they threw themselves off Sinjar mountain (the mountain on which they were besieged after ISIS' initial August 2014 attacks) when they managed to escape. They were lucky. Others who wanted to die but hadn't escaped had to settle for burning themselves alive.

“I can't seem to write these objectively,” one of my colleagues worried. “And every case they give me, it's all the same. I don't want all the applications for asylum thrown out because they're too similar: her husband was slaughtered in front of her, she was beaten, she was raped, she was brainwashed.”

Enslavement of the Yazidi women and girls was one of ISIS' earlier planned strategies as a genocidal assault on the community. The enslaved women and girls were hurt physically and psychologically, and those who escaped had trouble returning to their community due to the stigma of having been abused sexually by ISIS fighters.<sup>128</sup> Separating family members, or torturing them by forcing them to watch or listen over the phone as their loved ones were abused, further splintered the Yazidi community. Some of the captives were trafficked as sex slaves, some forcibly married to fighters; some were forced to get pregnant, others were forced to get abortions. All were forced to abandon Yazidi customs and convert to Islam.<sup>129</sup>

While women and girls were enslaved, young boys were considered potential soldiers, as ISIS believed they could (and did) brainwash them into carrying out missions.<sup>130</sup> Some now refuse to leave ISIS camps.<sup>131</sup> Meanwhile the adult men and some older women who were not killed were forcibly converted to Islam and used as slave labor.<sup>132</sup>

Again, even if ISIS' narrative internally justifies the death and enslavement of an entire people, the way it was carried out indicated brutality for the sake of brutality. Survivors from the villages around Sinjar Mountain told me how men were forced to convert, because if they did not, children would be made to kill them. Where in the Quran does it say that children should be forced to commit murder? This is, again, the type of information that can discredit ISIS' promises of utopia. More than one defector said that their reasons for leaving ISIS were in part the “cruel pleasure” some of their fellow fighters seemed to get from acts of heinous violence.<sup>133</sup>

They were committing violence for its own sake, it seems, not to create a more perfect world for Muslims.

## **MOVING FORWARD**

In broad strokes, there are three general groups of people who join ISIS: devout Muslims who believe in a utopian caliphate, the subjugated and starving, and the psychotic and violent. The latter two will not be swayed by a massive information campaign about the true nature of ISIS. Those who are unlucky enough to be caught in their territory will still likely have to choose between working for ISIS and starvation. Those who are eager to rape and kill will always find some outlet. Therefore, I focus here on the first group: Muslims who join ISIS believing that it espouses true Islamic doctrine in the face of a world that constantly discriminates against Muslims. The information contained in this paper is a small example of the massive amount of information that illustrates the difference between the promises ISIS made and the reality of life under its rule.

Every promise that ISIS has made about the benefits of living in its caliphate can be refuted. *Sharia* law? Applies in some cases, not in others. Utopian life where you're given an apartment? Good luck finding health care, electricity, and running water. Slaves to be purchased? Fellow Sunni Muslims. Exposing the reality of life under ISIS can directly attack their narrative, their legitimacy, and their promises of endurance of society.

In a recent study, 75 college students who felt isolated from their families (the majority of ISIS recruits are 18-20-year-olds and disconnected from their family) were shown video interviews with defectors from ISIS. While this is admittedly a small sample, 90 percent of participants said they thought videos like these would help prevent others considering joining ISIS from doing so, and 33 percent said it changed their views on ISIS from positive to negative.<sup>134</sup> Though this study is small, its results are incredibly promising in terms of changing the views on ISIS. If every foreign fighter had viewed these, and one third of them were convinced not to join ISIS, that could easily be 10,000 to 15,000 people. This method is something we should be taking advantage of.

There is of course the difficulty of spreading this information to those who might be persuaded to join ISIS. Some of those who joined ISIS in Syria had never been allowed to learn about their Sunni Muslim religion, and ISIS was their first exposure to Islam.<sup>135</sup>

Charismatic preachers and teachers could answer all the questions they had never been allowed to ask before. Under a regime like Syria under Assad, where access to information about Islam is restricted, information about ISIS' true nature may not be easily disseminated. Thus, open access to information is critical. Those who want to know about Islam should be allowed to ask and to study, so that they are able to get a full picture of the religion and culture, not simply the skewed one that ISIS provides.

But where it is possible, the reality of life under ISIS should be spread. Many who are not Muslim, who live in the west, may think it obvious that ISIS is evil. But the reality of life under ISIS is not obvious to all. Some of the supporters and recruits began as people searching for information about Islam, or wanting to connect with a Muslim community.

But due to the extensive efforts of ISIS' recruiters and the far flung promises they make, these people who began by simply wanting information or support become radicalized. In the online portals where radical Salafism is discussed, the inclusion of videos of ISIS defectors discussing the reasons they left or slaves telling the story of their harrowing escapes could help prevent others from joining.

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# ABOUT ITCT

ITCT is UK based organisation and founded in 2018. It is a non-political and non-profitable organisation and is a unique think tank in itself. There is not a single organisation around that specifically counters the narratives of Islamist terrorism by using the tools of Islamic Theology. ITCT exposes the root causes of Political Islam and works hard to eliminate it through introducing the actual concept of Islamic Theology.

ITCT conducts a comprehensive research to find out the key elements that draw the most vulnerable people of the society into the fire of religious extremism. ITCT works on three main factors in order to educate the Muslim community:

- That Islamist Terrorism is wrongly associated with Islam
- And is committed by misguided Muslims
- By manipulating religious texts to brainwash Muslims

## ITCT has three pillars to stand on:

- **MISSION**

Countering Islamist Terrorism

- **VISION**

Educating Muslim Community

- **OBJECTIVE**

Providing the Solution of Islamist Terrorism

ITCT is an independent organisation that generates funds through donations. ITCT warmly welcomes talented writers, researchers and experts and would like to publish their work.