

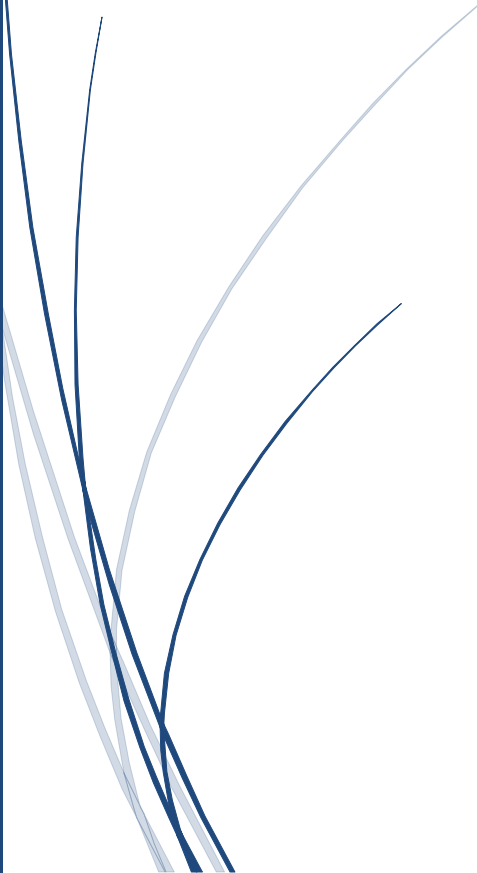


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# The Islamic State as State-Building

By Alexander Kfoury

Senior Thesis  
DEPAUL UNIVERSITY



## **Introduction**

The Islamic State in Iraq and al-Sham (ISIS), is at the center of the 21<sup>st</sup> century's most destructive physical conflicts, and it also occupies a special place in one of the 21<sup>st</sup> century's most troubling ideological conflicts. It is natural, then, that public discourse surrounding this group is often inseparable from the variety of emotions that these wider conflicts evoke in us. Yet, it is precisely ISIS's far-reaching relevance to the most difficult events of our time which necessitates a clear-eyed, objective analysis of this notorious group. Such an analysis is what I hope to present in this thesis.

The Islamic State has shocked the world on multiple accounts. It emerged from the abyss of civil conflict in two separate countries and cast its ominous flag of extremism over a swathe of territory which, at its peak, was comparable in size to the United Kingdom. It brought unspeakable acts of violence to people's computer screens across the globe, and then brought people from across the globe to their front lines to commit even more atrocities. It professed war on all so-called infidels, infiltrated foreign countries and committed massacres without warning, although these paled in comparison to the massacres they committed on their own home turf. The psychological effects of ISIS's power displays have been astounding, producing waves of anti-Islam backlash in countries which in reality have little to fear from an armed faction unable to handily defeat its own rebel competitors and two teetering third-world regime. ISIS is truly a manufacturer of terror, both at home and abroad.

Unfortunately, ISIS is no mere terror group. Virtually all experts have conceded that the Islamic State has demonstrated a relatively impressive level of organizational capability and scope compared to other jihadist groups. It claims to be a state, and while there is room for

debate on whether or not it has earned this title, they have undoubtedly set their sights on the establishment of a self-sustaining, ultra-fundamentalist, pan-Sunni Caliphate. In the following study, I will demonstrate that the Islamic State is in fact primarily involved in a state-building project. Additionally, I argue that the theoretical state-building model I develop in Part I does a fantastic job at accounting for the decisions and activities being undertaken by both ISIS and its subjects within and around the quasi-state that has been cut out across Eastern Syrian and North Western Iraq. However, I wish to stress that it is not my primary goal to put forth a definitive prediction of how the Islamic State saga will end. Rather, it is the *process* of state-building which we are concerned with here. ISIS's state-building efforts provide a rare case study into what happens when the international state system loses control of its own domain; The Islamic State phenomenon breaks all human rights norms, rips through post-colonial borders, and has cut all ties to political and economic development systems commonly assumed by development "experts" as integral to the future of most of the developing world. In this territory which, if only for a brief historical moment, has escaped the reach of the global political and economic system, state-building is indeed happening...*fast*. While with every day that passes the dream of the Islamic State increasingly looks to be just that- a dream which Jihadists will eventually wake up from- we must attempt to understand why it has not failed sooner. We must understand how state-building began so quickly, right under the nose of the world.

Charles Tilly perceptively warned, in respect to state-building studies, against introducing "misconceived models of Western experience [acting] as the criteria of political development", and I have attempted to ground my model in this guiding principle.<sup>1</sup> Any case study dealing with state-building must avoid the error of attempting to selectively integrate historical reality with

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<sup>1</sup> Tilly (1975); pg. 4.

contemporary views of how states *should* be built, and instead focus on understanding how states *have* been built. Accordingly, I have given priority in the construction of my theoretical state-building framework to objective and historically validated state-building processes rather than a more popularized and modernized criteria based on indicators such as democratic consensus and human rights. It will rapidly become clear during the case study that the latter type of state analysis would be counterproductive for someone trying to understand the decisions and processes at work in the Islamic State.

### **Part I: The Fundamentals of State-Building**

At the very least, a rudimentary theory of legitimate power must be established when approaching the state and state-building. Legitimacy of power precludes any establishment and perpetuation of a state. With this said, legitimacy of power in political discourse has often been distorted by a particular type of normative bias which warrants careful inspection.

I am referring here to the contemporary prevalence for what may be called *democratic essentialism*, in other words, the belief that legitimate state power in the modern world can only be achieved with broad voluntary support from a governed population. I. William Zartman, in his study of the restoration of legitimate authority in failed African states, summarized this perspective aptly when he concluded that “legitimacy must be restored early, through constructive participation and freely expressed support from society”.<sup>2</sup> In other words, what Zartman expects of African state-builders is that they use democracy to gain and maintain authority- a ridiculous expectation to have if one pauses to consider the fragmentation which arises from the complete breakdown of economic, political, and security structures in a state.

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<sup>2</sup> Zartman (1995); pg. 270

Democratic essentialists often distract from these realities by characterizing their position as morally and theoretically unassailable.<sup>3</sup>

Of course no one will argue that democratic consensus *cannot* be a platform for legitimate power, but to limit our understanding of legitimacy merely to a litmus test of popular opinion ignores the historical fact that the vast majority of states have secured legitimate power through coercive means. Those who balk at non-democratic means of legitimacy as an antiquated medieval phenomenon will be unhappy to be confronted by the countless examples of modern regimes who have maintained legitimate power by brute force for decades. The impending case study presented in this work similarly deals with a situation where the gathering of voluntary majority support for any faction will be impossible due to political fragmentation of the highest order. Thus, any solution to the Iraqi and Syria crises will need to possess a significant coercive potential. The historic relationship between state-building and coercive tactics will be central to my framework, but for now we are still concerned with the basic notion of legitimacy of power.

Arthur Stinchcombe provides a theory of legitimacy which avoids the limitations of modern democratic essentialism. He writes:

By analyzing in a few cases *who* has to believe in the legitimacy of a power for it to be stable, we will see that the person *over whom power is exercised* is not usually as important as *other power-holders*. If the

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<sup>3</sup> Sen (1999); pp. 148-149. Amartya Sen proposes, refutes, and rejects “three different directions” from which criticism of civil and political freedom in the developing world come from: 1) Rights and freedoms hamper development, 2) the preference of the masses for economic development over rights, and 3) Rights and freedoms go against Asian values. Conveniently, he seems to be refuting the weakest arguments against his position, while omitting the strongest critique he faces, namely that the protection of rights and freedoms has historically been antithetical to the expansion of state legitimacy, and the only states which actually enforce human rights standards are those Western State who, thanks to their coercive and oppressive pasts, “possess unconditional legitimacy in the eyes of the overwhelming majority of their populations” (Ayoob, 2007). In fact, the insistence of upholding human rights in many developing countries looks the most likely path to a failed state, and the failed state unfortunately is the most likely path to widespread human rights abuses.

criminal does not believe his arrest is legitimate, he can, in the classic phrase, “tell it to the judge.” If the judge supports him rather than the policeman, the policeman’s power comes effectively to an end.<sup>4</sup>

To rephrase, the legitimization of power at its most fundamental level is an interaction between power-holders, and not a relationship between those with and without power. Power-holders may be individuals (for example a charismatic or despotic ruler), or they may be groups (gangs, armies, interest groups, voters, ethnic groups, even states or coalitions of states). In any society, all power-holders attempt to exert influence on other power holders, and legitimate authority is only achieved when a power-holder group can convince all *other power-holders* to accept or at least tolerate its actions and assertions of power. Notably, this framework does not exclude popular opinion as a potential platform of legitimacy. But popular opinion represents merely one source of support for authority among a long list of means with which a power-holder can convince its rival groups to respect its authority.

The above theory of legitimate power is a central component of my theoretical approach to state-building for the simple fact that the history of intrastate and interstate relations has always and still is a continuous battle between various power-holders and power-holder groups grappling for authority using not just democratic means but also extreme coercive force and everything in between. By broadening our understanding of authority, the process of state-building no longer is confined to a mere popularity contest, but rather becomes a complex and dynamic competition for dominance.

This is all the more important since, in fact, the reliance on popular opinion rather than coercive force as a primary means of securing state authority is a fairly recent phenomenon, and one which is still only prevalent in Europe and North America. Turning specifically to the

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<sup>4</sup> Stinchcombe (1968); pg. 150

formation of *new states*, the record is even more violent – a truth commonly acknowledged in reference to the beginnings of many third world states, but sometimes dangerously forgotten as an integral aspect of the most successful examples of state-building in history, these being the Western European states. The prominent historian and sociologist Charles Tilly concluded firmly in review of both his and other experts’ work that:

Explicitly [we] agree that the building of states in Western Europe cost tremendously in death, suffering, loss of rights and unwilling surrender of land, goods, or labor. Implicitly, [we] agree that process could not have occurred without great costs.<sup>5</sup>

Striking a similar tone, Andrew Bell-Fialkoff reminds us that wholesale rejection by state-builders of large population groups and the consequent expulsion or massacre of these groups, commonly referred to as ethnic cleansing, was prominent in early European state formation:

As part of a general process toward greater homogeneity within states that began in the Middle Ages, “ethnic” cleansing took on medieval notions of religious purity, targeting minorities of “nonbelievers,” whether Catholic or Protestant, Muslim or Jew. With the profound secularization of the modern world, cleansing later manifested itself in political ideology...<sup>6</sup>

Violence and the formation of states that wield legitimate authority, far from being mutually exclusive, are virtually inseparable at a historically objective level.

Until now, the terms “State” and “State-Building” have been used in this work without formal definition, but with the logical and historical link between legitimate authority and violence established in a general manner, we are able to delineate both of these terms as they will

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<sup>5</sup> Tilly (1975); pg. 71.

<sup>6</sup> Bell-Fialkoff (1993); pg. 111.

be used throughout this work. Max Weber famously defined the state as “a human community that (successfully) claims *the monopoly of the legitimate use of physical force* within a given territory”.<sup>7</sup> This definition, advanced nearly a century ago, has achieved wide acceptance and continuing relevancy in political thought throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century and even into the 21<sup>st</sup> century due to both its theoretical soundness and historic demonstrability. Theoretically, it is impossible to envision a state which allows the general use of physical force (violence) outside of its own government security forces and/or outside of specific instances which the government legally and preemptively sanctions (for example, use of defensive force in the event of an illegal home invasion may be preemptively ruled permissible by the state). Historically, all successful states have at some point monopolized the means of violence within their given territory; conversely, the loss of a previously established state monopoly on violence leads to a *failed state*, an entity which no longer qualifies as a state.<sup>8</sup> While there exist many different types of states which can be further identified by various characteristics, the only common feature of *all states* is the maintenance of a monopoly on violence.

If the state is an entity which holds a monopoly on legitimate violence across a given territory, *state-building*, then, must be the consolidation and strengthening of such a monopoly.

Mohammed Ayooob identifies the three key processes that occur simultaneously during early state

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<sup>7</sup> Weber (1919). Weber limited “pure” state legitimacy to three sources (charisma, tradition, and rule of law), apparently excluding blunt coercion as a form of legitimate authority. Nonetheless, he states that “in reality, obedience is determined by highly robust motives of fear and hope... To be sure, the pure types are rarely found in reality”. Thus, I do not take Weber’s theory of legitimacy to be at odds with Stinchcombe’s theory of legitimacy as previously discussed.

<sup>8</sup> Tilly (1985) holds up the Tudor demilitarization of the great lords in England, and Richelieu’s similar campaign in France, as early examples of violence monopolization in Europe. Moving in the opposite direction, the disintegration of the state’s violence monopoly gives birth to *warlordism*, the dynamics of which are explored by Marten (2007) in her comparative study of medieval European, Somalian, and Afghani warlordism. Warlordism, by definition, entails the existence of multiple violence users in a single territory that “fundamentally undermine attempts at state consolidation”. Thus, Somalia & Afghanistan are considered *failed states*. Ayooob (2007) conveniently reminds us that “there was no dearth of “Somalias” and “Liberias” in seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Europe.”



formation as [1] the expansion and consolidation of the physical domain of the new state, leading to the imposition of order in previously contested areas (war), [2] the continual maintenance of order (policing), and [3] the extraction of resources from the territory and population under control of the state (taxation).<sup>9</sup>

These three facets of state-building, War, Policing, and Taxation, will be examined in great detail throughout the case study. When carried out continuously and successfully over a large territory, what forms from these three activities can only be considered a state. Considering that the criteria formed here gives priority to those activities of the state which are fundamentally *imposed* on the governed, the foundations of this state-building model would seem to suggest a bleak world where the state is nothing but a profitable enterprise for those in power. Yet, it is impossible to ignore that states which are most successful in these three functions, these unambiguously being the states of Western Europe and North America, tend to also be superior in providing services, development, and stability to their respective populations. This raises the question of how best to connect state-building and the interests of state leaders with those of the governed. The answer lies in *protection*.

Protection represents the fourth facet of state-building, which crucially serves as the most fundamental benefit that a governed populous will demand in exchange for accepting the impositions of the state, these primarily benefitting state leaders. Protection should be taken here to mean *the shielding from costs associated with anarchy*. As we have already accepted that a state is essentially a monopoly on violence, it follows then that states are ultimately an alternative to anarchy. Anarchy, for its part, imposes real costs on every person and enterprise under its reign. At a personal level, the product of intense labor can be stolen, property can be

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<sup>9</sup> Ayoob (2007).

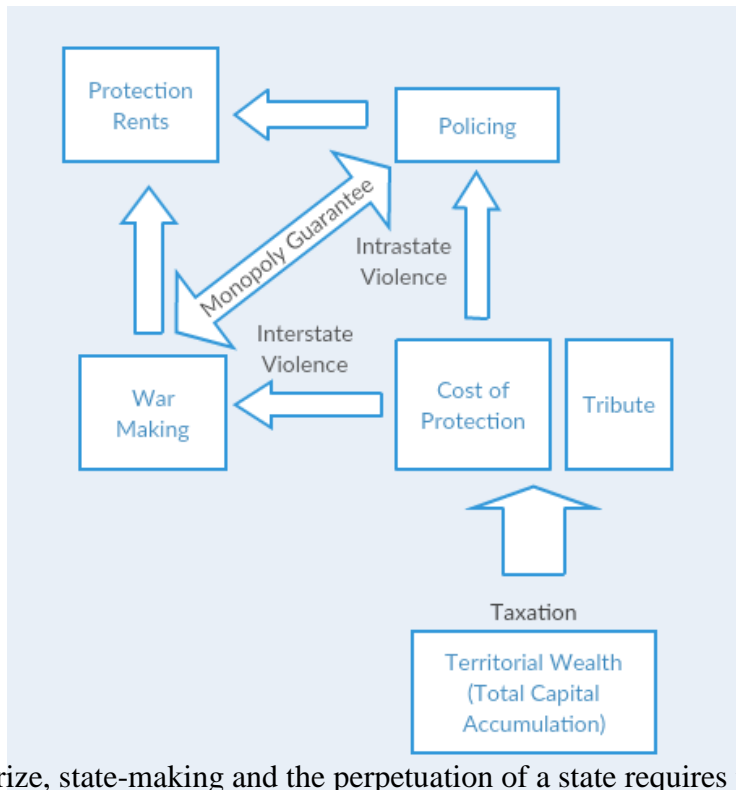
destroyed, and even life can be taken without any guarantee of retribution, compensation, or even advanced warning. Similarly, economic, political, and civil activity is subject to a long list of uncertainties which increase costs for productive enterprises. It is these costs that centralized states serve to reduce or eliminate, and the extent to which they succeed at this determines the price which citizens are prepared to pay to support and tolerate state power.

Economic Historian Frederic C. Lane developed a useful model for state-provided protection through his studies of early European state formation.<sup>10</sup> First, he noted that the provision of violence is a natural monopoly; competition over the rights to exercise violent force actually raised costs, much like competing electrical grids in the same area might do. Thus governments could be considered businesses whose product was violence, and the market tended towards monopoly outcomes. Subsequently, taxes levied by the state were simply the monopoly price charged in exchange for protection benefits gained from the provision of violence. To be clear, protection benefits included both the increase in relative associated with central governance, and the guarantee that state violence would not be directed towards paying customers. This system as a whole yields two types of profit in society: 1) The monopoly profit (tribute) gained by government leaders, equaling the amount collected in excess of the costs of producing violence and 2) protection rent gained by customers (various groups of state subjects) equal to the reduction in costs associated with anarchy. An example of the latter would be the decreased risk to merchants of having their wares stolen by armed bandits due to the presence of government security forces. Here we can integrate Lane's theory of protection with Ayoob's facets of state-making (War, Policing, and Taxation), depicted in Figure 1.

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<sup>10</sup> Lane (1966); pp. 383-398 & 412-430

**Figure 1.** The State-Building Process



To summarize, state-making and the perpetuation of a state requires the establishment and maintenance of a monopoly through war and policing. These activities benefit state leaders by guaranteeing them a monopoly from which they can extract tribute via taxation. Nonetheless, taxation also must cover the legitimate costs of protection, and the benefits of policing (centralized order) and war making (if successful, the expansion of the zone of protection and increased power) produce protection rents. Interestingly, this model depicts essentially the same system as that found in a classic mafia-style protection racket<sup>11</sup>, and the thin line between organized crime and state-building should therefore be kept in mind as we approach the case study.

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<sup>11</sup> Both Lane and Tilly stress this analogy. Protection Racketeers demand payment from businesses in their territory for protection, and if the payment is not made, the business will be both vulnerable to rival gang violence (war) and retribution from the local racketeer himself (policing). An extremely successful expansion of a protection racket is therefore much akin to state-building.

Charles Tilly's contribution to Lane's foundation was twofold.<sup>12</sup> First, he emphasized that as a state's violence monopoly expands, the ruler's influence and ability to collect tribute grows, while protection rents simultaneously grew (at least for those socio-economic interest groups who benefitted from territorial expansion and increased security, such as merchants and capitalists). The development of a continuously symbiotic relationship between state-builders and private economic groups throughout the 16<sup>th</sup>-18<sup>th</sup> century in Western Europe was the natural result of this meeting of interests.

In the course of making war, extracting resources, and building up the state apparatus, the managers of states formed alliances with specific social classes. The members of those classes loaned resources, provided technical services, or helped ensure the compliance of the rest of the population, all in return for a measure of protection...<sup>13</sup>

Thus, the basis for responsive and effective governance in Europe was forged by the convergence of interests of private economic groups and rulers, and by extension, local capital accumulation became a priority of the state. To provide the above mentioned loans, technical services, and political will, rulers needed to ensure that their protection-buying clients continued to accrue wealth, knowledge, and influence.

As we now have a fully developed theoretical model for state-building, the following case study applies this model towards the analysis of ISIS state-building processes. The foundations of this model alone confirm the minimum value of this analysis; the wholesale rejection of ISIS as state-builders based on the assumption that they are too violent or too disorganized or too thug-like to ever succeed is clearly nonsense in the face of overwhelming evidence that early European state-building was no less violent, disorganized, or criminal. In

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<sup>12</sup> Tilly (1985).

<sup>13</sup> Id.

fact, as we will see in Part II, the conditions in Syria and Iraq were in a sense ripe for a state-building project when ISIS burst onto the scene, and the model developed here does a fantastic job of accounting for both the successes and failures of the Islamic State.

## **Part II: State-Building & The Islamic State**

### **The Islamic State: A Brief Historical Introduction**

The Islamic State in Iraq and Al-Sham (ISIS or later shortened to IS) undoubtedly represents the most recent episode of a much larger historical jihadist narrative which can be traced back perhaps as far as one would like. The roots of contemporary political Islam go back at least to the 1920's, which saw the establishment of the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt. Yet, here I choose to focus on the set of events which directly constitute the establishment, expansion, and consolidation of the Islamic State. Readers are encouraged to follow its lineage farther back than has been done here.<sup>14</sup>

ISIS is first and foremost a product of the insecurity and jihadist rally point created by the American invasion and occupation of Iraq from 2003 to 2011. While Saddam Hussein persecuted Islamists for much of his rule, the death of pan-Arabism as a viable political narrative pushed the dictator in the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century towards an embrace of religious politics, actively cooperating with jihadist groups which he had previously seen as a threat.<sup>15</sup> Thus, when the

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<sup>14</sup> For a comprehensive account of Jihadist and Political Islamist developments in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, see Kepel (2002). Where Kepel ends his historical account is more or less where the story of ISIS begins. For further reading on the ideological roots of Islamic State, see Bunzel (2015).

<sup>15</sup> Atwan (2015); pp. 32-34

American invasion forced Hussein into hiding, even he predicted that “radical Islam would provide the cohesion necessary for the [coming] insurgency to be effective”.<sup>16</sup>

Of course, the utter failure of American forces to instill order and unity in the aftermath of Saddam’s ousting did create perfect conditions for the growth of sectarian jihadist insurgencies, and in 2002, a Jordanian Salafi Jihadist under the *kunya* (a name used by jihadists different from their birth name, often referencing their city or country of origin) of Abu Mus’ab al-Zarqawi arrived in northern Iraq. Zarqawi quickly formed al-Tawhid wal-Jihad (God’s Unity and Jihad, ATWJ) and eventually pledged allegiance to Osama Bin Laden’s Al-Qaida.

ATWJ quickly became the go-to insurgency group for foreign fighters wishing to enlist in anti-American jihad, and by 2004 Zarqawi was leading a campaign against both American and Shi’a targets, gradually gaining a reputation for ruthless violence. As the Iraq War dragged on, Al-Qaida leadership demoted Zarqawi due to the alienating effects his aggressive tactics had on locals<sup>17</sup>, but not before he created an umbrella organization of jihadist groups, which eventually took up the name Islamic State of Iraq (ISI) in 2006.<sup>18</sup> Zarqawi is considered a founding father and legend to current Islamic State members, and “directly contributed to the Islamic State’s two most prominent ideological tenets: an extreme anti-Shi’ism and a focus on restoring the caliphate”.<sup>19</sup> From 2006 to 2013, ISI continued to lead a moderately successful insurgency campaign, and were ultimately considered synonymous with Al-Qaida’s Iraq branch by most

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<sup>16</sup> Atwan (2015); pg. 32

<sup>17</sup> Zarqawi was killed shortly thereafter in an American airstrike on June 8, 2006.

<http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2006/06/08/AR2006060800114.html>

<sup>18</sup> Atwan (2015); pg. 51

<sup>19</sup> Bunzel (2015); pg. 13

media and security analysts. Yet for the time being, ISI was nothing more than a “Paper State” of Sunni jihadists.<sup>20</sup>

It was during this time frame that the current Caliph of the Islamic State, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, first came to lead ISI, and in mid-summer of 2011 al-Baghdadi dispatched a well-known ISI member, Abu Mohammad al-Jolani, to Syria, where a new conflict was rapidly escalating.<sup>21</sup> ISI decided to rebrand their Syrian extension as Jabhat al-Nusra (Victory Front) so as to obscure its affiliation with Al-Qaida and ISI, the latter having gained a particularly negative reputation of extremist views and violent tactics.<sup>22</sup> Already, al-Baghdadi was planning to create a formidable allied jihadist presence in what would become the 21<sup>st</sup> century’s most devastating conflicts. By the end of 2012, Al-Nusra had become a successful and respected element of the anti-Assad regime opposition.<sup>23</sup>

In April of 2013, al-Baghdadi announced that ISI would be expanding its operations to Syria and reabsorbing Jabhat al-Nusra, becoming the Islamic State in Iraq and al-Sham (ISIS).<sup>24</sup> Jolani swiftly refused the merger, asserting that al-Nusra was better off directing its Syrian operations without interference and warning that ISI’s reputation would cause al-Nusra to lose its hard earned support amongst locals and the opposition. Jabhat al-Nusra instead affirmed its continued allegiance to al-Qaida. Al-Qaida’s current leader Ayman al-Zawahiri ordered al-Baghdadi to confine his operations to Syria, but it was too late; Baghdadi would not turn back,

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<sup>20</sup> Bunzel (2015); pp. 17-24

<sup>21</sup> Lister (2015); pp. 55-60

<sup>22</sup> Atwan (2015); pp. 122-124

<sup>23</sup> Lister (2015); See Chapter 6, *Jabhat Al-Nusra Rises*. Al-Nusra was on the forefront of cultivating an increasingly significant jihadist participation in the Syrian conflict, often coordinating in battle with other jihadists and also elements of the ostensibly moderate Free Syrian Army.

<sup>24</sup> Lister (2015); pp. 119-124

and jihadists now loyal to the newly formed ISIS began to organize in Syria.<sup>25</sup> Surely some of the new ISIS fighters were sent directly across the border by ISI's leadership, but Lister (2015) provides an in-depth account of ISIS's early formation in Syria which reveals that ISIS's Syrian branch was initially formed from sub-elements of al-Nusra who remained loyal to Baghdadi and confident in ISI's reputation, as well as other Salafi groups who previously had loose ties to ISI but not to al-Nusra.<sup>26</sup>

By the summer of 2013, ISIS began rapidly expanding its operations and territorial reach in Syria. ISIS developed an aggressive presence in Idlib, Aleppo, Latakia, Raqqa and Deir a-Zour, at first cooperating with regime opposition groups including Jabhat al-Nusra, but eventually turning on such groups.<sup>27</sup> In terms of establishing full territorial control, the new group was particularly effective in establishing itself in Northern and Eastern Syria. As 2013 drew to a close, ISIS began gaining ground in Iraq, particularly in Anbar province, seizing Fallujah and for a short time, Ramadi.<sup>28</sup> Early 2014 saw ISIS push its momentum, openly fighting rival opposition and jihadist faction in Syria<sup>29</sup> and implementing strict Sharia law in its quasi-capital city of Raqqa.<sup>30</sup> Yet the most astounding battlefield achievements would come in the summer of 2014, during which ISIS fighters began a massive and multi-front assault on Iraqi lands controlled by the Shia-dominated Iraqi government. In June of 2014, ISIS captured Iraq's second largest city, Mosul, along with vast stretches of territory in Iraq's Ninawa, Salah a-Din, Diyala, Kirkuk and Anbar provinces, brutally executing non-Sunni and Iraqi Army prisoners

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<sup>25</sup> Atwan (2015); pg. 123

<sup>26</sup> Lister (2015); pp. 133-135

<sup>27</sup> Lister (2015); pp. 151, 166-167, 182-183

<sup>28</sup> Atwan (2015); pg. 125 & Lister (2015); pp. 182-183

<sup>29</sup> Lister (2015); pp. 185-205

<sup>30</sup> Lister (2015); pp. 206-207



along the way.<sup>31</sup> ISIS's good fortunes also helped it tilt the balance in Syria by transferring captured weaponry to its insurgents on Syria's northern and eastern front, which helped it strengthen its grip particularly in Deir a-Zour and Raqqa.<sup>32</sup> It was in the context of these stunning developments that ISIS formally declared the establishment of the Islamic Caliphate, with al-Baghdadi as its Caliph.<sup>33</sup> By September, with ISIS, now shortened to the Islamic State (IS) looking stronger by the day, the United States began an air campaign against the group.<sup>34</sup>

Of course, much has happened since September of 2014 and the nature of the Syrian and Iraqi conflicts dictate that the IS's borders are always shifting. Changes in peripheral territories notwithstanding, what we are concerned with here is the state-building process which has occurred in the Islamic State's urban strongholds and territorial heartland since ISIS's rapid expansion (although the External Environment section will tackle some of the effects that prolonged conflict is currently having on the Islamic State). This section has presented what is undoubtedly a brief and oversimplified account of the origins and formation of the Islamic State, yet we can already observe three important realities often missed or understated by analysts. Understanding these realities precludes any effective analysis of how ISIS has attempted to craft its state.

First, *the Islamic State is a product of anarchy*. Syria's civil war and the widespread discontent and resistance of Shia dominance in Iraq provided a unique opportunity for ISIS to redraw a significant amount of territory along sectarian lines. Within these conflict zones, local populations suffer from the lack of security and resource, making the theory of state-building as

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<sup>31</sup> Lister (2015); pp. 206-207 Atwan (2015); pp. 126-127

<sup>32</sup> Lister (2015); pp. 234-235

<sup>33</sup> <https://newrepublic.com/article/119259/isis-history-islamic-states-new-caliphate-syria-and-iraq>

<sup>34</sup> Scutto (2014).

the establishment of a protection-producing enterprise highly applicable to this case study. As we will see, the balance between protection and the costs that come with it are extremely important for understanding how the ISIS is building its state, as well as how popular opinion of the Islamic State changes over time.

Next, ISIS is fundamentally an amalgamation of a diverse group of jihadist factions (but also non-jihadists, as will be discussed) which was consolidated first in Iraq through the formation of ISI as an insurgency umbrella group, and then in Syria through a messy process of realigning allegiances and attracting new members after the definitive split from al-Qaida. Even during its 2014-2015 takeover and consolidation of North Western Iraq, ISIS was but one of many discontented Sunni groups cooperatively fighting the Shia-dominated government.<sup>35</sup> For the Islamic State to succeed to any degree, its state-builders must maintain widespread legitimacy with the vast majority of these groups. *The Islamic State is not a homogenous entity*, but rather a complex and ever-changing hierarchy of extremist ideologues, militants, tribes, hired thugs, local populations and foreigners. This will be shown to have a significant effect on how IS state-builders must maintain legitimacy and monopolize violence in their territory.

The third key reality is that while the Islamic State may represent a complex and potentially unstable network of factions, there nonetheless exists a core leadership group which firmly believes in its ideological mission and has proven it can unilaterally gather and coordinate support around its cause. Most importantly, ISIS's core ideologues are indeed primarily interested in state-building as the ultimate end to their endeavors – this was made clear ISIS shocked the jihadist world by declaring a caliphate despite pleas and condemnations coming not

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<sup>35</sup> Lister (2015); pg. 232. Sly (2014). Abbas (2014). Banco (2015). "ISIL Wins Support from Iraq's Sunni Tribes" (2015).

just from moderate Sunni voices, but al-Qaida's top leaders themselves, who urged that the Caliphate was still a distant goal.<sup>36</sup> The mission is clear: *Caliphate now, not later*.

These three fundamental realities form the foundation of the case study. What follows is a holistic examination of ISIS and their project to build an Islamic State. Already, we have developed a model of state-building which draws primarily from European state-building history. The main aspects of this model can be summarized succinctly as follows:

1. *Legitimacy of the State* is established through power-holder relations. The State need not rely solely on coercive or persuasive means for its legitimacy, but more than likely must use a mix of methods to consolidate its legitimacy. State Legitimacy is established when other power-holders within the state accept and tolerate decisions of the State.
2. *A State is fundamentally a monopoly on violence* – The state sells and produces violence, and states have historically relied on coercive means to establish authority. Therefore we should not be surprised that state-building leads to violence, nor can we reject the Islamic State as too violent a group to undertake state-building. When a monopoly on violence is broken, the state has failed.
3. *State-Building is the consolidation and strengthening of the monopoly*. State-building involves 4 key activities of the state: 1) War-Making, 2) Policing, 3) Taxation, and 4) Protection. The first three activities are fundamentally impositions on the governed body. The fourth activity benefits the governed by shielding them from anarchy and retribution from the governed itself.
4. The interaction between these four activities produce the state-building model as depicted in Figure 1, which gives us theoretical criteria to assess state-building activities. Most importantly, protection rent is gained by various groups within the governed population which equal the reduction in costs associated with increased protection (the abolition of anarchy) less the costs of said protection.

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<sup>36</sup> Among others, veteran jihadist ideologues Abu Muhammad al-Maqdisi and Abu Qatada al-Filastini both issued strong condemnations against Bahdadi's proclamation of the caliphate, stressing that ISIS had skipped crucial stages of forming an Islamic State. See Bunzel (2015); pg. 27.

I argue that analyzing the Islamic State through a legitimacy and protection rent-based model yields a far better result than the alternatives: either attempting to understand the actions of ISIS and those under its rule as uniquely associated with a particular ideology, or applying the various models of state development commonly applied to post-colonial third-world states. We will see that IS does not truly fit the bill as a homogenous puritanical polity nor does it operate under similar conditions of other third world states which have been heavily influence in their development by the patronage and norms of the international system. The nascent caliphate and its notorious state-builders (ISIS) are very much in the business of building a state in the classic European sense.

### **ISIS as State-Builders: State Structure and the Establishment of Legitimacy**

As demonstrated in our brief look into the origins of the Islamic State, the current episode of headline-grabbing activity in Syria and Iraq is not ISIS leaders' first attempt at expansion. Over a decade of insurgency, terrorist activities, and political maneuvering have allowed ISI and now ISIS to develop relatively complex and efficient command structures and effective strategies for co-opting and coercing various local factions into the state hierarchy. Dissecting this hierarchy allows us a window into the first critical aspect of state formation- the establishment of legitimacy from the highest echelons of leadership to the average foot soldier and citizen.

#### ***The Caliph and his Cadre***

Despite his high-profile position, relatively little is known about Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, the Islamic State's iconic Caliph and 'Commander of the Faithful'. Through the tumultuous first years of his fledgling state-building project he has remained a shadowy figure, rarely appearing in public. Those close to him have revealed he is a charismatic and experienced leader,

possessing a convincing combination of religious credentials (holding a PhD in Islamic Jurisprudence and History) and cunning leadership experience from his time with ISI.<sup>37</sup> Al-Baghdadi, whose real name is Ibrahim Awad Ibrahim al-Badri, was even detained for an extended period of time in the American Camp Bucca for alleged insurgent activities, no doubt a badge of honor in the eyes of his hardcore followers.<sup>38</sup> Al-Baghdadi also enjoys the support of a huge tribal network, himself hailing from one of the largest tribes in the Arab world, Al-Qurayshi tribe, and having marital ties to Al-Dulaimi tribe as well.<sup>39</sup> Conveniently, members of Al-Qurayshi claim direct descent from the Prophet Muhammad, so that Baghdadi even enjoys a nuanced cultural claim to the caliphship that is often missed by outsider analysis.<sup>40</sup> The extent to which al-Baghdadi alone has absolute control over the entirety of ISIS's ranks is unclear, yet a lengthy debate over such a topic is unnecessary. Whether al-Baghdadi is simply a puppet of an even more mysterious figure, a front man for his known backers, or truly a man of far-reaching influence and absolute power, what is clear is that he is more or less the right man to be the face of the Islamic State. His personal and religious credentials already go a long way to suggesting a surface-level form of legitimacy for the caliphate, at least on paper.

However, no functioning state has ever been established by merely looking good on paper. Continuing downwards in the hierarchy of the Islamic State reveals a complex bureaucracy and core leadership group which undoubtedly manages the bulk of day-to-day operations and planning in the Caliphate. The Caliph reportedly maintains two deputies, and at

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<sup>37</sup> Sherlock (2014).

<sup>38</sup> Id. Also Atwan (2015); pg. 115-116 gives a separate account of al-Baghdadi's time at Bucca, with slightly differing dates than other reports. Also, see Walker (2015).

<sup>39</sup> Atwan; pg. 113 & 117.

<sup>40</sup> Bunzel; pg. 18, 23, 26

one point these were identified as Abu Muslim al-Turkmani and Abu Ali al-Anbari.<sup>41</sup> Al-Turkmani was a member of Saddam Hussein's military intelligence unit and supervised provincial governors in Islamic State-held areas until his death in August of 2015 in an airstrike.<sup>42</sup> Similarly, Al-Anbari was a member of the military during Saddam Hussein's rule and has likely risen in rank since the death of al-Turkmani.<sup>43</sup> Both men would seem peculiar picks for the new Islamic State's highest positions, as past members of the historically anti-Islamist Ba'athist Saddam Regime. Even more peculiar is that they are not alone: rather, they represent a broader faction of ex-regime officials that have joined ISIS's ranks, bringing with them significant military and security experience to the Islamic State. Ex-Saddamist officers have reportedly helped to oversee informant networks and war tactics, and also financing operations.<sup>44</sup> Whether these former Ba'athists are true believers in the Caliphate or simply political opportunists will greatly affect their long-term dealings with IS, but for now it appears that, at least in the top echelons of ISIS leadership, ex-regime members have tied themselves to the mast of al-Baghdadi's group.<sup>45</sup>

Al-Baghdadi's deputies are reported to directly supervise provincial governors in Iraqi and Syrian territories.<sup>46</sup> Additionally, multiple sources have suggested that al-Baghdadi works closely with a Shura (consultative) council and Sharia (religious) council<sup>47</sup>, as well as a cabinet

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<sup>41</sup> Lister (2014).

<sup>42</sup> Sanchez (2015).

<sup>43</sup> Orton (2015, The Syrian Intifada).

<sup>44</sup> Coles (2015).

<sup>45</sup> Id. While decidedly anti-Islamist, Saddam Hussein had attempted late in his life to co-opt Islamic conservative groups in order to diminish the influence of anti-regime Islamists. This "Faith Campaign" involved the close partnership of intelligence officers and Salafist groups, and Lister (2015); pg. 263, claims this resulted in the legitimate radicalization of some military leadership. For a similar perspective see Orton (2015, The National Review). Others are less convinced, as one local's testimony demonstrated: "The Baathists are using Daesh [ISIS]. They don't care about Baathism or even Saddam... They just want power." – Sly (2015).

<sup>46</sup> Thompson (2015). Al-Hashimi (2014).

<sup>47</sup> The distinction between the two is often blurred. Id. Atwan; pp. 138-143

of advisers which head bureaucracies for governing day to day activity in the Islamic State. Predictably, ISIS has not made public the specifics of its leadership structure, so piecing together a complete picture of its nascent government requires caution in selecting sources of information as well as a great deal of guesswork. I choose to focus on the former and leave the latter up to those more qualified than I. Below is what leading Islamic State Intelligence experts (hopefully) know.

### The Sharia System

The Islamic State prides itself in maintaining an air of religious legality in its operations, even if that legality is based upon selective and perverse readings of scripture and history.<sup>48</sup> Key to this image of formality and ideological consistency is “a top-down bureaucratic chain” of Sharia authorities which forms the main, if not the only, judiciary system in its territories.

The highest body of religious authority under the caliphate is known as the Sharia Council, which is responsible for all religious and judicial standards (laws and punishment), selecting the caliph, and supervision of more localized sharia bodies as well as religious outreach.<sup>49</sup> The Sharia council directly manages the decisions most likely to reach global audiences and affect public opinion of the caliphate, such as the burning of Muath al-Kasasbeh and the high-profile killing of the American citizen James Foley.<sup>50</sup> The Sharia council also choose the caliph.

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<sup>48</sup> March & Revkin (2015).

<sup>49</sup> Atwan (2015); pp. 138-140.

<sup>50</sup> Hashem (2015).

On a more local level, each province has a sharia deputy and sharia commissions who oversee a range of courts and judges.<sup>51</sup> In theory, these courts are intended to deal fairly with all complaints within the area, whether religious or civil, raised by both IS personnel and citizens alike, although we will see that this is not always the case.<sup>52</sup> Any deviance by local judges from the general objectives and judicial rulings of the Sharia council, the Caliph, or other senior authorities leads to swift removal from post, legal punishment, and even execution.<sup>53</sup> A special Islamic police force, *Hisbah*, is in charge of moral policing.

### Shura Council

The Shura Council, headed by a shadowy man named Abu Arkan al-Ameri, is allegedly the most influential advising body to the caliph, with some even suggesting it even has the power to impeach the Caliph (although this is unlikely).<sup>54</sup> It is charged with overseeing the more secular and logistical aspects of maintaining the state, although there are few details available about the totality of its operations. Nonetheless, captured Islamic State documents have hinted at the broad influence of the Shura council in decisions such as the establishment of financial rewards for killing enemy combatants, the extension of deadlines for enemy groups to repent and pledge allegiance to IS, and even directly approving al-Baghdadi as official Caliph.<sup>55</sup>

### Military and Security Operations

Despite its impressive territorial holdings, ISIS is still at war. Thus, the bureaucracy behind military and security operations is key to the ultimate success of the Islamic State. We

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<sup>51</sup> March & Revkin (2015).

<sup>52</sup> Atwan (2015); pg. 139.

<sup>53</sup> March & Revkin (2015).

<sup>54</sup> Anjarini (2014)

<sup>55</sup> Al-Tamimi; Specimens 1E, 5W, and 10F.



have already seen that the Caliph's two closest deputies are not religious figures but rather military strongmen with the technical expertise to advise and coordinate military operations in Syria and Iraq. However, this merely scratches the surface of IS's military and security apparatus.

Below al-Baghdadi and his deputies sits a Military Council which is primarily concerned with territorial control and expansion.<sup>56</sup> This council, also headed by an ex-military official of the Saddam regime, coordinates everything from battlefield tactics, supplies and weapons shipments, the administration of training camps, and fighter movement. It is likely that the chain of command is split between Syrian and Iraqi fronts; for example, a primary document captured from the Islamic State indicates that the well-known Chechen Jihadist Omar al-Shishani held the title of General Military Commander for the Northern Region until his recent death in a U.S. airstrike. Interestingly enough, Brookings Institute claims al-Shishani was the Chief of Syria military operations, whereas Abdel Bari Atwan has stated he is chief of staff for the military council.<sup>57</sup> These title discrepancies between leading ISIS experts demonstrates the subtle difficulties in accounting for the ever-changing and shadowy leadership structures of the Caliphate.

While mapping the particularities of the ISIS military structure from top-to-bottom may be impossible with given shortage of information, there is overwhelming evidence that a highly organized command structure does exist. Again, captured documents provide key insights into this structure. One document contains specific delegation of military objectives for local

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<sup>56</sup> Atwan (2015); pp. 140-141

<sup>57</sup> Al-Tamimi; Specimen 11E. Lister (2014). Atwan; pg. 140

commanders written by Omar al-Shishani himself<sup>58</sup>; Other documents include calls for recruitment, military ID badges, exit/entry checkpoint permits, and personnel transfer notices, among other items.<sup>59</sup> Captured IS weapons analysis as well as recovered material from IS Improvised Explosive Devices (IEDs) indicates that ISIS was able to efficiently relocate massive amounts of captured American weaponry from Mosul to Northern Syria (a journey of approximately 500 km) in two weeks, and also persistently source IED components from complex (and lawful) international supply chains.<sup>60</sup> Another instance of organized weapon transfers were demonstrated when, hours after ISIS overran Mosul, Omar al-Shisani's appeared in a photograph in Syria standing next to American Military Humvees.<sup>61</sup> Overall, it seems that a key aspect of ISIS's military successes has been its ability to coordinate its objectives and maneuvers such that victory on one front has led to victories on the other. The effectiveness and high level of organization seen in ISIS's ranks certainly makes a strong case that it is no rag-tag team of suicidal fanatics.

### Non-Military Operations

Aside from immediate leadership and military operations, the Islamic State has also made an effort to cultivate a long list of civilian ministries, including an extremely effective media wing, a finance ministry in charge of budgeting, a services agency in charge of coordinating government services at local level, educational systems, and even an agency specializing in precious resource allocation and regulation.

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<sup>58</sup> Al-Tamimi; Specimen 11E

<sup>59</sup> Al-Tamimi; Specimen 1A, 9D, 9R, 12O, and 12M

<sup>60</sup> Dispatch From The Field: Islamic State Weapons in Iraq and Syria (2014). Tracing The Supply of Components Used in Islamic State IEDs (2016).

<sup>61</sup> Lister (2015); pg. 234

In short, the Caliph and his cadre, the likes of which make up the upper echelons of the Islamic State's nascent government, have purposefully constructed an extensive bureaucratic system which encompasses more aspects of typical state activity than most outsiders would expect. While the most valued of al-Baghdadi's group seem to be those providing much-needed military experience to the group, the IS hierarchy also incorporates financing and aspects of soft governance. There is much evidence to suggest that these bureaucracies are functioning well enough to at least meet the fledgling state's short-term military, security, and governance objectives, and at the very least serve as a system of communication between the inner-circle of ISIS leadership.

### ***Commanding the Faithful, and Others***

Of course, every functioning state bureaucracy relies on its middle-to-low level personnel to complete the objectives set by higher authorities- the Islamic State is no different. Its foot soldiers, local employees, and other small-time pawns are the key to ensuring that the decisions of the Caliph and his men are enforced- and thus seen as legitimate. In the previous section we previewed IS from the top-down. Now we must ask: Who is really carrying out the dirty work of building the state?

### **The True Believers**

Nearly all Islamic State personnel will claim to have faith in the ideological and moral righteousness of the Caliphate, but it would be foolish to take every one of these professions as genuine given the harsh retribution that dissent and opposition earns within ISIS territory. However, it would be equally foolish to assume that true believers are non-existent or scarce across ISIS ranks.

Interviews done with Islamic State fighters and other personnel have revealed that these “faithful” individuals hail from a wide range of backgrounds. Many of them are local: Michael Weiss and Hassan Hassan, for example, present the stories of a range of ISIS converts such as a well-off Syria 15 year old who joined against his parents’ wishes, Salafist Kurds strangely untroubled by the Islamic States brutal military campaign against their people, and Ultra-conservative Salafist Syrians who formed networks while imprisoned by the Assad regime.<sup>62</sup>In a more general sense, both of the historically secularist Assad and Saddam regimes in Syria and Iraq had actively pivoted towards encouraging Salafist Islamist and Jihadist activities for political gain through the opening years of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. While Saddam carried out his Faith campaign, which ultimately may have greased the wheels for the radicalization of many Iraqi military leaders, Bashar al-Assad conducted his own flirtation with jihadist circles in hopes of both pulling them under his control and exporting extremists to Iraq, where the American occupation had created a center of gravity for Islamist militant activity.<sup>63</sup> Across the region, tendency for Arab governments to co-opt religious structures has repeatedly proved to be a dangerous game, and Colin Beck suggests that state attempts to control religious currents for short-term political gain effectively shelter Islamic movements from repression faced by more secular political groups, thus encouraging the gradual Islamization of political activity.<sup>64</sup> The fact that large numbers of hardcore jihadists have enlisted in ISIS from both the Iraqi and Syrian populations may be a testament to the unintended consequences of state-sanctioned Islamism.

But the Islamic State also pulls true believers from outside the conflict itself, and the phenomenon of foreign jihadists travelling to fight in ISIS ranks has caught global attention.

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<sup>62</sup> Weiss (2015); pp. 156-160

<sup>63</sup> Lister (2015) provides a detailed account of Assad’s pivot towards Islamists. See Chapter 3, “Syria’s Flirtation with Jihadism.”

<sup>64</sup> Beck (2009)

While exact figures cannot be produced, an estimated 27,000 to 31,000 individuals had travelled to Syria and Iraq to join the Islamic State by December of 2015.<sup>65</sup> Sunni (and Shia) Jihadist migration to various global hotspots is nothing new; conflicts in Afghanistan, Bosnia, Iraq, and the Arabian Peninsula have all attracted significant numbers of Islamist militants ready to fight for what they often see as a global struggle to defend and liberate their religion. What *is* new is the sheer volume of fighters flocking to ISIS and the diversity of origins from which they come. While Arab nations such as Saudi Arabia, Tunisia, and Jordan appear to be supplying the highest numbers of foreign ISIS fighters, unprecedented levels of fighters are also flowing in from Western Europe and other areas seemingly completely removed from the Syrian and Iraqi conflict.<sup>66</sup> Admittedly, many in this group may not be “true believers” in the absolute sense. The extensive amount of research and discussion aimed at discerning the motives of these foreign recruits has only made it clear that there is no single reason why individuals travel to the Caliphate, and no single demographic can truly be pinned down as the at-risk group.<sup>67</sup> Many may not fully understand the choice they are making or may become disillusioned once they arrive. Yet, despite evidence that a small number of these foreign fighters have defected, this group pales in comparison to the estimated 30,000 or so that have joined ISIS’s ranks.<sup>68</sup> As a whole, these foreign fighters will be crucial to the state-building project, voluntarily fighting with the caliphate, bringing international skills and networks with them.

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<sup>65</sup> Barrett & the Soufan Group (2015).

<sup>66</sup> Id.

<sup>67</sup> Weiss & Hassan (2015) suggest many are driven by differing motives such as political frustrations, suicide wishes, or simply adventurism. Atwan points out that education or criminal records also cannot definitely identify at-risk groups. The Soufan group asserts that motivations are more personal than political.

<sup>68</sup> For a report on Defector Narratives, see Neumann (2015).

## Fair-Weather Fans

Next to the true believers stand those Islamic State fighters, officials, and low level personnel who are working with the Islamic State for one reason: They believe that ISIS will succeed, at least in the short term, and they also believe that by aligning themselves with this new and powerful group, they themselves stand to benefit. In other words, they are the Caliphate's fair-weather fans.

It is well-known that much of the Islamic State's initial success in Syria can be accounted for by the fact that their reputation of effectiveness, discipline, and ruthlessness was enough to pull many foreign Jihadist and Islamist brigades away from other umbrella groups such as Jabhat al-Nusra and Ahrar ash-Sham, instead pledging allegiance to ISIS.<sup>69</sup> This early lesson, that legitimacy and support can be won by demonstrating organizational momentum, has not been lost on Islamic State leaders. From disenfranchised secular Sunnis fearing impending Shia rule to war lords and even ex-drug dealers looking to simply be on a winning team, the Islamic State seems like their best bet- and ISIS has actively courted sectarian and economic interests to enlist support.<sup>70</sup>

One particularly important group of local power-holders are the tribal leaders, who in turn hold sway over large tribal networks throughout Islamic State territories. Tribal politics are nothing new to the leaders of IS; in 2006, when ISIS was simply ISI and often considered synonymous with al-Qaida in Iraq, the unification of Iraqi Sunni tribesman against radical insurgents lead to major setbacks for the jihadist insurgency.<sup>71</sup> This time around, ISIS appears to be approaching tribal relations with a new degree of strategic planning and care, gaining a

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<sup>69</sup> Lister (2015); pp. 134-135. Weiss & Hassan; pp. 160-162

<sup>70</sup> Weiss & Hassan (2015); pp. 162-165.

<sup>71</sup>Wilbanks & Karsh (2010). Atwan; pp. 50-52.

remarkable amount of tribal allies throughout its early land-grab. From exploiting long-standing tribal rifts in order to gain supporters against rival jihadist factions, to bringing warring tribes together in order to mediate conflicts and keep the peace, and even allocating high-ranking personnel to geographical positions where their tribal backgrounds will not instigate problems, the Islamic State has adopted a dynamic approach to fostering and maintaining tribal support.<sup>72</sup> Of course, while those tribes that actively resist IS are brutally punished<sup>73</sup>, many have pledged allegiance without a single shot being fired.<sup>74</sup> The tribes see the Islamic State as having the capacity to exact revenge on dissidents and reward loyalists, and until now, this has been enough to prevent a second tribal uprising. As one ISIS member state:

“People are racing to win the trust of the State... ISIS is a new authority in our area, and people rush to present themselves as leaders to push for their personal interests, and tribalism is above everything for these people, Our leaders know this, we’re not stupid.”<sup>75</sup>

By co-opting tribesmen and other mid to low-level opportunists into the state structure, whether this be in a military or civilian capacity, the Islamic State gains valuable, localized expertise, which it can exploit not only for basic work, but also as an informant network and support base.

### ***State Structure and Implications for Legitimacy***

By dissecting the Islamic State level-by-level, the following general picture emerges: the Islamic State is structured as a pyramid, similar to most states in the world. At the top of the pyramid, the Caliph and his core leadership team set general objectives, direct strategic planning,

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<sup>72</sup> Weiss & Hassan (2015); *Shakedown of the Sheikhs*.

<sup>73</sup> Albu Nimr’s anti-ISIS stance resulted in a gruesome massacre. See Gartenstein-Ross & Jensen (2015).

<sup>74</sup> Powell (2014).

<sup>75</sup> Weiss & Hassan (2015); pg. 207

and oversee mid-level authorities, who in turn are responsible for the day-to-day activities of war-making, policing, taxation, and protection (taken to include both protection from violence and “soft” protection, such as the provision of utilities and other basic services) of subjects. Mid-to-low level Islamic State military and civilian personnel have been categorized here as either ideologically committed true believers, or opportunistic fair-weather fans.

Of course, the distinction between these two groups is often blurred on an individual basis. Opportunists are likely to outwardly pretend they believe in ISIS’s ideological platform. Similarly, true believers may become disillusioned with ISIS’s goals but wish to remain on a winning side. Furthermore, I have clearly ignored one significant group of Islamic State collaborators completely: involuntary workers and fighters. Yet, for the purposes of state-building analysis, I propose that both of these issues do not matter. Why?

If we have accepted that state legitimacy is solely reliant on the confirmation of state authority by other power-holders, then surely individual-level ambiguities between true belief, opportunism, and fear-driven collaboration matter far less than aggregate stances of large intrastate elements. In other words, the existence of an opportunist amongst a large group of faithful jihadists or the fact that a local war lord is lying about his conversion to the Caliphate’s brand of Islam are completely irrelevant details if *the majority* of true believers remain steadfast in their support for the Caliphate while *the majority* of opportunists remain convinced of the benefits associated with IS allegiance – if this is the case, state legitimacy is preserved. Similarly, individuals who wield such little power that they become *involuntary* collaborators with Islamic State are by definition irrelevant to the notion of state legitimacy. However, if these individuals are driven to join together in a manner which makes them *power-holders*, they may have significant impact on state development, and hence the focus on tribal and sectarian groups, as



well as warlords, all of which control significant means of resisting IS rule as co-operative units. Indeed, if the Caliphate is to suffer from internal collapse as hoped for by many outside observers, it will not be individuals who begin this process but rather groups of individuals, led by local power-holders.

Yet, transitioning from an invading (and in many cases, liberating) military force to a fully-fledged government necessarily alters how momentum must be sustained. The evolution of the state-building project through distinct phases of broadening scope is the focus of the remainder of the case study.

### **Consolidation of the Islamic State: A Mandatory Free-Trial**

Undoubtedly, the early advances of the Islamic State produced outrage and condemnation from most mainstream Muslims, both from outside and within conflict zones. Massive migrations out of areas falling to ISIS produced thousands of internally displaced peoples as well as refugees. Yet, the initial takeover also produced images of large groups of locals pledging allegiance to the Caliphate.<sup>76</sup> In a broader sense, the idea that locals would not immediately revolt against such an outwardly extremist group such as ISIS naturally confuses outside observers. The key to understanding how the Islamic State gains a foothold of legitimacy in the opening period of its state-building operations is by analyzing protection rent. Protection rent, defined previously as the reduction in costs associated with protection less the costs of said protection, is surprisingly high for many under Islamic State rule in the initial phases of its occupation.

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<sup>76</sup> For one example see <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KuHcu7ywyA> Also, see 7:04 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AUjHb4C7b94>

## *Setting the Bar Low*

Most areas captured by the Islamic State were previously subjected to protracted and often violent repression and/or total anarchy, and thus the mere forced expulsion of regime and rebel forces often significantly reduces a range of costs for locals. In essence, the Islamic State's predecessors set a low bar for governance. For instance, conditions in Mosul had been miserable in the days leading up to the Islamic State take-over, with near constant anti-Maliki unrest, lack of services, violence, and crime.<sup>77</sup> As one Mosul Neurologist who eventually fled ISIS rule stated:

“Mosul was on a volcano's edge a couple of months before Islamic State's militants crawled into the city...When ISIS took control of Mosul, they treated locals decently, clearing out all checkpoints imposed by the army and opening roads. People could not believe their eyes that there was no Shia army in the city, no more detainees and bribes”<sup>78</sup>

Another Mosul citizen in the early days of IS rule asked:

“Do you know how it was in Mosul before ISIS came? We had bombings and assassinations almost everyday. Now we have security”.

Such negative sentiments about pre-Islamic State conditions are repeated across many areas of Islamic State control, even from those who oppose its ideological end-game. In Syria, many locals gave the Islamic State the benefit of the doubt when they noticed ISIS treating locals better than other more moderate armed factions. A local in the Syrian town of Minbij recalling early tensions between ISIS and other rebel factions, stated:

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<sup>77</sup> Wilgenburg (2014).

<sup>78</sup> Mahmood (2015).

“People did not see anything but good things from ISIS, even though they did not like its religious ideas. They also know that those who fought [ISIS] were the worst people in the area.”<sup>79</sup>

A resident of Islamic State’s critically important Deir a-Zour province echoed that sentiment:

“We never felt this safe for twenty years. We no longer hear shooting. We no longer hear so-and-so killed so-and-so.”<sup>80</sup>

Similarly, a Syrian media activist living in turkey who previously had witnessed the takeover by ISIS of al-Bab, recalled that even though rebel control in his town had been relatively functional, ISIS made a point of capturing “bad” battalions (groups which had stolen from locals to fund their activities) and punishing them.<sup>81</sup> Critically, the Free Syrian Army brigades had never been able to decisively end regime bombardment, but suddenly this stopped once Islamic State took control due to the Assad regime’s focus on fighting moderate rebels while allowing headline-grabbing and internationally undesirable Islamist factions to become the face of Syrian opposition. In fact, reports of decreased or delayed regime air strikes have been a near constant phenomenon in Islamic State strongholds, and Assad regime officials as well as other insiders have openly admitted that fighting the group is not a top priority.<sup>82</sup> For example, while ISIS took over its de facto Syrian capital, Raqqa, in August of 2013, regime airstrikes only began a full year later.<sup>83</sup>

Military check-points, assassinations, sectarian violence, theft, bribery, and air strikes – all these represent costs that are generally imposed on populations in conflict zones, and thus factor

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<sup>79</sup> Weiss & Hassan (2015); pg. 223

<sup>80</sup> Weiss & Hassan (2015); pg. 227

<sup>81</sup> Weiss & Hassan (2015); pp. 216-219

<sup>82</sup> Barnard (2014), & Baker (2016)

<sup>83</sup> Lister (2015); pg 253.

into Syrian and Iraqi citizens' decisions of whether to embrace or reject Islamic State authority when they seize new territory. Some of these costs, such as those related to airstrikes and sectarian conflict, were immediately (but temporarily) erased in areas where IS quickly expelled unpopular armed factions as well as non-Sunnis, and enjoyed the benefit of Assad's lack of interest in fighting extremists. Other costs needed to be mitigated in a more deliberate manner.

### ***Governance as Cost Reduction: The Islamic State as Protector***

The Islamic State made a concerted effort to reduce anarchy costs on locals at the outset of their rule so as to win hearts and minds. More specifically, it focused on returning basic security, adjudication, services, and supplies to areas which had long suffered from constant fighting and lack of central organization. Examples of the successes of these initial efforts are widely distributed across many of its territories.

For example, residents of Manbij, Ramadi, and Raqqa have reported that Islamic State made it a priority to restore and maintain utilities such as running water, electricity, and fuel supplies to its territorial holdings.<sup>84</sup> In Deir az-Zour, ISIS was able to secure key oil fields and gas plants which had previously been constantly contested by various rebel factions, thus ensuring regular access to energy sources for locals.<sup>85</sup> In most Islamic State territories, residents also reported that crime fell dramatically due to what was a consistent and effective, if brutal judicial system- this was a notable and well-received change for most residents who had become used to a lack of central authority.<sup>86</sup> In one notable testimony, a resident of Albu Kamal claimed that IS had

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<sup>84</sup> "Manbij and the Islamic State's Public Administration" (2014). Cunningham (2015). Karouny (2014).

<sup>85</sup> [Hassan Hassan](#)

<sup>86</sup> Atwan (2015); pp. 139-140. "Manbij and the Islamic State's Public Administration" (2014). Weiss & Hassan (2015); pp. 227-229

helped him regain money lost to a fraudster before the Syrian uprising even began.<sup>87</sup> IS has been known to discipline its own fighters for mistreating locals, and even banned soldiers from entering Mosul with their weapons, most likely as a gesture of responsiveness to complaints.<sup>88</sup>

Price-fixing and direct provision of basic supplies has also been a common ISIS tactic to win hearts and minds. In Deir az-Zour, Islamic State reportedly reduced gas prices for locals from the previous price of 200 Syrian pounds per liter to just 45 pounds per liter, and also began supplying flour and income to those in need.<sup>89</sup> Similar reports of charitable food handouts have come out of Raqqa, Minbij, Mosul, and other areas.<sup>90</sup> In many cases, Islamic State consolidation meant simply paying off local power holders- mainly tribal leaders- to accept their authority, as was the case in Deir az-Zour, where it spent \$2 million dollars on buying allegiances.<sup>91</sup> While many may dismiss these as mere bribes, this should not be discounted as part of the protection rent equation. Just as individuals gain from Islamic State's subsidization of utilities, thus increasing their protection rent, so do tribal leaders gain, albeit more directly, from the financial excesses of ISIS, and these gains are directly compared to relative protection gains offered by other groups.

Captured internal Islamic State documents have confirmed what local testimony suggests about ISIS's focus on protection maximization, especially in the early phases of territorial consolidation. One document indicates that ISIS repaved a road and planted new trees between Albu Kaml and al-Qa'im.<sup>92</sup> Another document lays out regulations for bakeries, including production quotas and indicating some type of cooperation between the Services Agency (Diwan

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<sup>87</sup> Weiss & Hassan (2015); pg. 227

<sup>88</sup> <http://www.alaraby.co.uk/english/news/2015/1/4/islamic-state-group-sets-out-first-budget-worth-2bn>

<sup>89</sup> Hassan (2014).

<sup>90</sup> "Islamic State Group Sets out First Budget, worth \$2bn." (2015). Karouny (2014). Atwan (2015); pp. 141-142

<sup>91</sup> Lister (2015); pg. 242

<sup>92</sup> Al-Tamimi, (24 Aug. 2015); Specimen C

al-Khidimat) and bakeries- again suggesting direct control of food distribution.<sup>93</sup> A document from Anbar province even requests garbage compactors to remove waste from the town of Hit.<sup>94</sup>

Everything from opening roads to providing judicial bodies, rationing resources, and direct wealth transfers represents a huge reduction in daily costs for locals – thus it is *protection*. Furthermore, there is substantial evidence that IS augmented the effect of this protection by fronting the costs of governance and delaying the implementation of tax systems. One captured document from Mabij states:

By order of the governor of Aleppo, the services office... has placed more than 600 flags on all the entrances to the town and its surrounding. The office has also made the Manbij-Jarabulus road passable for traffic, and has opened a maintenance workshop for the sewage system in the eastern quarter, has planted trees on al-Imaan street, and has done maintenance work on the courthouse... And all the expenses have been referred to the Diwan al-Wilaya.<sup>95</sup>

Analyst Mara Revkin conducted interviews with Mosul residents under Islamic State rule and found that ISIS initially provided “essential services” for free (presumably basic utilities) and only later instituted tax systems.<sup>96</sup>

The group also tends to delay the most extreme and arbitrary aspects of their Sharia system until state authority is more established, focusing the energies of its Islamic policing first on “ordinary crime – thieves, murderers, drug dealers, and rapists are primary targets,” and only gradually switching to the coercive and sadistic penalties for which it has gained notoriety.<sup>97</sup>

### ***Implications for State-Building***

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<sup>93</sup> Al-Tamimi, (24 Aug. 2015); Specimen U

<sup>94</sup> Al-Tamimi, (24 Aug. 2015); Specimen V

<sup>95</sup> Al-Tamimi, (24 Aug. 2015); Specimen A

<sup>96</sup> Revkin (2015).

<sup>97</sup> Revkin (2015).

In summary, the Islamic State often looks to maximize protection rents for locals in the early days of its consolidation by both decreasing costs imposed on locals by the previous lack of central governance, and also by foregoing the opportunity to tax and impose strict controls on locals in exchange for these protections, instead fronting funds and delaying the implementation of its most extreme ideological principles. The dual effects of reduction in anarchy costs and the subsidization of protection during the initial phases of Islamic State takeover effectively creates a sudden increase in protection rents enjoyed by locals. These protection dynamics, shown here to be a common theme across many areas of Islamic State control, offer a solid explanation for why many locals gave ISIS the benefit of the doubt early in their land grab. Indeed, the availability of testimony from anti-ISIS refugees and activists demonstrates that even those opposed to its ideological end game have a hard time denying the significant benefits which Islamic State offered to locals during their early consolidation.

Of course, there is one significant caveat which I have thus far ignored- any protection rents gained from ISIS rule are a compulsory deal for those who are offered. Moreover, many deemed incompatible with the state-building plan never live to see such improvements in security and services. Reports of mass executions are widespread from the early days of ISIS expansion, and just like any state, ISIS must establish a monopoly on violence in its new territories quickly if it is form a viable state. As Charles Lister notes:

IS governance is rather like a mafia boss who hands out small carrots from his left hand while waving a sledgehammer in his right. Moreover, IS ultimately aims to build a Sunni Islamic state, and consequently non-Sunni Muslims and people of other faiths living within its territories lack the benefits enjoyed by their Sunni neighbors.<sup>98</sup>

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<sup>98</sup> Lister (2015); pg. 274

In essence, then, the opening phase of Islamic State rule can be thought of as a *mandatory free-trial*: Locals may end up enjoying elevated protection as a result of the initial security and services provided by IS, and the costs of this protection are subsidized by ISIS itself until state authority has been established. Additionally, citizens face near-certain arrest or execution if they refuse the new protection deal, which implicitly increases protection rent by raising the *potential costs* of forgoing security. When analyzed from this perspective, it becomes clear that, for many living in Syrian and Iraqi conflict zones, the decision to at least tolerate Islamic State authority in the initial phases of its consolidation is nothing but a rational calculation of one's own best interests. Unfortunately, free-trials never last forever.

### **Expansion of the Islamic State: Challenges to State-Building**

There should be no doubt, at this point, that ISIS is primarily engaged in a state-building process. From its early inception, the goal of statehood proved to be a guiding principle for its leaders. In practice, we have seen that in the earliest days of its land grab and subsequent consolidation of authority, ISIS was simultaneously and deliberately involved in war-making, policing, and protection- three of the four fundamental activities of a state as identified in my theoretical framework. It successfully monopolized violence across a large territory and established legitimacy through a mixture of violent purges and co-optations of local power holders, while also forming a hierarchical bureaucracy which proved capable of providing basic protection functions such as adjudication, internal policing, external defense, and service provisions. Of course, at every level there are ambiguities and inconsistencies that do not fall perfectly into the parameters of the proposed theoretical model, and governance is not necessarily uniform across the entirety of the Islamic State's territory. But on the whole, much of



the available information on life inside the Islamic State suggests a process of state-building not far removed from the violent and chaotic realities of early European state-making.

With all this said, the prospects are at best mixed for a long-term, viable Islamic Caliphate situated across Eastern Syria and North-Western Iraq. In the previous section I advanced a legitimacy and protection-based account for why the Islamic State was able to consolidate its authority so effectively in its early days. The same framework can also demonstrate why ISIS is very likely to fail relatively soon. While protection rents and general legitimacy may have been high in early periods of ISIS consolidation, I believe these gains have slowly been eroded due to numerous factors.

### ***Protection Rent Erosion***

While early stages of Islamic State consolidation may have brought much appreciated protection to areas in Syria and Iraq which had previously been exposed to warfare, sectarianism, and anarchy, more recent information has shown that these gains for locals have largely been offset by the combined effects of higher protection costs via taxation, general deterioration of protection services, and an increasingly brutal governance style which alienates local who were never fully committed to the Islamic State's ideological project to begin with.

It was noted previously that ISIS initially chose to forgo taxation- the fourth primary activity of states- ostensibly to augment protection rents in their new territories. Put simply, delaying taxation and throwing money and supplies around was an effective way to win hearts and minds. Islamic State's financial and physical resource clout early in its state-building process was made possible by likely holdover budget surpluses from its predecessor groups, which had developed extensive and independent illicit revenue streams during the American occupation of

Iraq.<sup>99</sup> Additionally, Islamic State was able to capture an approximate \$425 million dollars in cash from Mosul Banks alone, as well as huge supplies of American-made weapons and other resources. It was this war chest which allowed them to provide near cost-free protection to locals early on. Yet, this was an inherently unsustainable method of governance, especially for a nascent state tasked with simultaneously rebuilding war-torn cities, fighting a multi-front conflict, and relying on salaries and subsidies to buy support. Moreover, unlike many Jihadi groups such as al-Qaeda, ISIS, like its predecessor group, does not enjoy large-scale external financing, with best estimates putting the overall portion of ISIS's budget coming from outside sources at 2-10%.<sup>100</sup> While there is no evidence to suggest it is facing an existential financial crisis just yet, it is unsurprising that the Islamic State has quickly turned to local taxation and resource extraction to fund its operations.

There is a wide variety of evidence that costs imposed on locals via taxation have grown rapidly in the Caliphate. For example, captured financial accounts in the Islamic State's Deir az-Zour province indicate that taxes constitute 23.7% of the provincial government's income, nearing \$2 million extracted in total – not including confiscations of property, which makes up another 44.7% of the budget, valuing close to \$3.7 million.<sup>101</sup> While the same financial accounts indicate that some of this may be redistributed as services to locals (approximately 17% of expenditures are claimed by the Services Department), the bulk of expenditures went to fighter salaries, many of whom are foreign. The transfer of wealth to foreign fighters along with other

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<sup>99</sup> Brisard & Martinez (2014).

<sup>100</sup> Al-Tamimi (2015); Reality of The Islamic State's Finances and Economy" Podcast Interview. Brisard & Martinez (2014).

<sup>101</sup> Al-Tamimi (5 Oct. 2015).

privileges they enjoy is an issue which locals have shown they are increasingly displeased with.<sup>102</sup>

Estimates on the Caliphate's total tax revenues have been proposed, but are necessarily inexact. One estimate suggests Islamic State might be pulling in as much as \$360 million a year, taxing common goods, utility usage, bank transactions, and road use, not to mention more openly extortionary taxes like protection fees for non-Muslim citizens and other undesirables.<sup>103</sup>

Residential testimony from Mosul similarly suggest steep taxes have gradually been imposed on water and electricity.<sup>104</sup> Other than regular taxation, captured documents suggest ISIS nickel-and-dimes its citizens for small violations. Selling cigarettes, for example, was assigned a fine of 10,000 dinars, whereas transporting cigarettes (presumably large amounts) was assigned a fine of 250,000 dinars.<sup>105</sup> In Manbij, ISIS imposed a fine of 2000 Syrian pounds on anyone who was caught putting waste outside of proper containers, and a tax of 250 Syrian pounds a month was imposed on all merchants for "various types of services".<sup>106</sup> Often, prices being set by ISIS are actually higher than what they were previously, leading to rapid inflation of living costs. One woman from Northern Syria claimed that propane gas had shot up from 50 cents to \$32 dollars per tank, effectively preventing residents from being able to cook on a stove.<sup>107</sup> It is impossible to definitively calculate the fiscal and resource burden which has been shifted onto Islamic State subjects over time, but what these and other examples have shown is that costs are rising in the Caliphate, and this necessarily shrinks protection rents.

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<sup>102</sup> Sullivan (2015).

<sup>103</sup> Brisard & Martiniez (2014).

<sup>104</sup> Revkin (2015)

<sup>105</sup> Al-Tamimi, (24 Aug. 2015); Specimen Q

<sup>106</sup> Al-Tamimi, (2016); Specimen 2T

<sup>107</sup> Sullivan (2015).

While costs rise, there is a second protection rent-eroding force which is likely to increase local anti-ISIS sentiment, this being the deterioration of the real quality of protection and governance being provided to them. Many locals who were first pleased with the restoration of basic security and services to their war-torn cities and towns are now increasingly vocal about the disintegration of conditions inside the caliphate. Basic utility systems such as water and gas distribution have been reportedly failing in multiple IS-held cities, and thousands of air strikes against ISIS buildings, camps, refineries, leaders, and other targets have taken their toll on Islamic State administrative capabilities.<sup>108</sup> Horrifying reports of the increasingly arbitrary and brutal justice system suggest that citizens now worry much more about protecting themselves from their occupiers than about external forces, although this could easily change in the case that another power vacuum opens up. General responsiveness of governance seems to be failing. In one documentary of life under ISIS rule, a member of the Islamic State moral police was begged by local men to ask the courts to release person recently arrested without just cause. When the officer responded that any citizen could raise an inquiry to the magistrate, they responded “Our voices are not being heard, your voice will be heard!”<sup>109</sup>

We should be careful about extrapolating these examples to mean that, as one headline suggested, “The Islamic State is failing at being a state”. The reality is that many states did not develop responsive and inclusive institutions for many years after their initial formation. The modern tendency to equate services and popular approval as a measure of statehood has already been revealed as historically untenable. The challenges presented by ongoing conflict and destruction should not be understood as the decisive end of ISIS’s state-building project. On the other hand, what we can say confidently is that the erosion of protection rent for the general

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<sup>108</sup> Sly (2014). “Operation Inherent Resolve” U.S Department of Defense, (2016).

<sup>109</sup> See <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jOaBNbdUbcA>; 5:58

population produces a strong incentive for individuals to challenge the legitimacy of the Caliphate's state-builders. How ISIS is able to cope with these challenges is the true make-or-break moment for the Islamic State.

### *Challenges to Legitimacy*

No single individual can unilaterally challenge a state's authority. This holds true even in the case of the Islamic State, despite the fact that it is barely a state at all. That is to say, if full statehood requires a complete monopoly on violence, then we might say that the Caliphate is a quasi-state due to its constantly fluctuating territorial holdings. The internal legitimacy of this quasi-state is increasingly facing challenges as it attempts to consolidate its grip on territory against mounting external opposition. To successfully transition to statehood, the Caliphate will have to both exhaust opposition from external power-holders and successfully quell any opposition from recalcitrant internal power-holders. Currently, it would seem that they are failing to do this.

Beginning with external opposition, the Islamic State is essentially state-building against the world. The Caliphate cannot count on sustained large-scale support from any major country, nor can it ignore the international coalition which has formed for the purpose of destroying its fledgling state structure. It will not be able to decisively destroy the countries attacking it or make explicit peace with them. Furthermore, ISIS has thus far seemed unwilling to simply fade back into the shadows of insurgency. Thus, in terms of external legitimacy, the best outcome possible for ISIS's state-builders (at least for those not expecting the apocalypse any time soon) is that they can establish an implicit international legitimacy through external tolerance of their state's existence.

This is not necessarily impossible. Containment of the Islamic State has been at the very least an implicit policy consideration of the coalition since the Islamic State first took shape, despite the ever-present “Degrade and Ultimately Destroy” rhetoric of Operation Inherent Resolve.<sup>110</sup> Recent peace talks which have completely ignored the Islamic State and the impending Russian pullout from Syria would further suggest that international powers are at least willing to put off dealing with ISIS directly, hoping instead that local forces will eventually retake ISIS held territory. In this case, the Islamic State’s provocative attacks on western targets would seem a puzzling habit. Do these attacks not strengthen the resolve of the international community to do more than simply contain ISIS?

Perhaps the Caliph and his followers are truly as thirsty for an end of days battle with foreign infidels as both they and their secular enemies suggest. But the calculation is most likely more nuanced than that. The Islamic State may have elected to call the West’s interventionist bluff, in the process galvanizing its true believers around symbolic victories. The lack of a massive western ground invasion of Iraq and Syria would seem to vindicate such a decision. On the other hand, coalition airstrikes have undoubtedly imposed massive damage on the Islamic State in terms of personnel, equipment, and infrastructure. Yet these have been far from decisive blows. Ultimately, if western powers continue to be ground war-averse, Islamic State legitimacy does not seem to be completely imperiled by coalition airstrikes. However, a sustained air campaign will continue to damage state infrastructure, threaten leadership, and most importantly, divert resources away from other aspects of state-building and buy time for local forces such as the Iraqi Military, the Syrian regime, Kurdish forces, and the moderate Syrian Arab opposition to

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<sup>110</sup> See Flournoy et al. (2015) for further thoughts on the division amongst Washington Foreign Policy experts on Anti-ISIS policy options, particularly in respect to containment versus total destruction.

regroup. Indeed, recent reports suggest that the Islamic State has lost as much of a fifth of its territory to its ground rivals.<sup>111</sup>

Internal challenges to legitimacy have been increasingly visible in recent months. In early October of 2015, Islamic State opened a general amnesty period for military deserters, indicating that the group may be experiencing loyalty and morale issues.<sup>112</sup> This problem has likely worsened, not least due to apparent salary cuts for fighters enacted later that year due to “exceptional circumstances” facing the Caliphate.<sup>113</sup>

Desertion may be a symptom of faltering momentum, but it does not necessarily imply an organized challenge to state authority. Until now, it appears that the most likely internal challenger of Islamic State legitimacy will come once again from Tribal power-holders. Rumblings of a second Sunni awakening have long been audible, with reports of tribal volunteers preparing to fight ISIS popping up throughout 2015.<sup>114</sup> However, sectarian mistrusts and a lack of fast-acting international support delayed early attempts to reclaim major IS territorial possessions; furthermore, most of these volunteers were from outside actual ISIS control zones. More recently, in early February, ISIS was forced to put down an armed tribal revolt in its stronghold of Fallujah amidst reports that civilians in the city were starving.<sup>115</sup> Conditions such as these will only increase the likelihood of local power-holders forming ever-larger coalitions to fight the Islamic State.

The situation can be summarized as this: The Islamic State faces a relatively effective international air campaign, growing ground opposition, and increasing difficulties governing and

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<sup>111</sup> Strack (2016).

<sup>112</sup> Al-Tamimi (2016); Specimen 9I.

<sup>113</sup> Al-Tamimi (2016); 12Q.

<sup>114</sup> Al-Shibeeb (2015). Jannsen & Yacoub (2015). Al-Jawoshy et al. (2015).

<sup>115</sup> Morris & Salim (2016). "Fallujah Tribes Stand Against ISIS Terrorists, Clashes Continuous" (2016).

policing its population at home. Furthermore, ISIS is unable to provide the protection rents it once utilized to consolidate astounding amounts of force, nor is it able to completely monopolize coercive force within its ever-shifting borders. For all its relative military and bureaucratic sophistication, ISIS appears to have developed only a shallow ability to govern, unsurprisingly failing under organized pressure from local demands and increased opposition. State-building against the world has truly proven to a difficult if not impossible feat for a group which has otherwise shocked much of the world with its ability to achieve its objectives, however perverse.

## **Conclusion**

This study began with a theoretical examination of state-building which culminated in my advancement of a state-building framework that emphasizes war-making, policing, taxation, and protection as the four primary activities of states. These aspects of state-making were based on the assertion that legitimacy of the state is necessarily a product of power-holder relations, and that the state needs only to monopolize the use of violence in order to perpetuate itself as a state. I wish to emphasize, rather than conceal the fact that this model is almost completely dependent on early European state-building experience.

With this framework firmly in place, I attempted to put forth an unbiased, objective, and holistic analysis of the Islamic State for what it is: a state-building project. ISIS is no longer a mere terror group, nor is it a full state. Instead, ISIS has and still is primarily engaged in operations designed to create longstanding state structures. Specifically, we have seen that it has actively pursued a highly bureaucratized system of governance, and has made some coordinated attempts at governance and co-optation of locals across its territory. ISIS conducts all the activities of a state (war-making, policing, taxation, and protection) but currently looks incapable



of surmounting the challenges which constitute its make-or-break moment of statehood. I define the Caliphate as a quasi-State, and by studying the processes of state formation that are occurring daily in north West Iraq and Eastern Syria, I believe this research has suggested a set of broader conclusions which may be applied to a range of issues in modern political discourse.

The first conclusion is fairly straightforward: State-building as it is often understood in the contemporary, normative sense, is not only inapplicable of explaining western history, but it is also utterly useless in a modern context, during which the most pressing questions of state-building undoubtedly erupt from the chaos of failed states. On the other hand, the framework I rely on is deliberately non-normative and embraces the historical theme of violent upheaval and power politics so often shunned in contemporary political discourse. The efficiency and ease with which this type of perspective can be integrated with the realities on the ground in Iraq and Syria indicates the desperate need for rethinking the general approach to failed state intervention and “nation-building” as the term was used (and confused) in Iraq and Afghanistan. Where democratic essentialism has precious little to say about why many locals reluctantly welcomed the ISIS presence, simple protection rent analysis provides a strong account of this phenomenon. Where foreign aid theory and developmental economists have tried for decades to spur third-world governments into enthusiastically augmenting their state’s capacity, the Islamic State has performed one of the most vigorous state-building exercises in recent memory, a simple product of the need to source wealth locally rather than externally. In short, the theories proposed by scholars such as Charles Tilly, Frederic Lane, and Mohammad Ayoob must be kept at the forefront of state-building thought.

The second conclusion to consider is that there is nothing fundamentally unique taking place in the Islamic State. If we are to recognize correctly that European states were formed

through violent means, through messy processes of consolidation between endless power-wielding groups, fueled oftentimes by a widespread exhaustion from anarchy and a drive for greater protection, then we must also recognize that the people of Iraq and Syria are by the great majority held captive by the same forces- my analysis has shown this in great detail. For the great majority of individuals who collaborate or ostensibly support the Islamic State, the decision to do so is merely a calculation of self-interest, not indicating an absolute preference for extremism, but rather a relative preference for security- a lack of which is now stirring the pot of resentment, slowly but surely, against the Islamic State, ironically. For those who voluntarily participate in the brutal acts of the Islamic State, the true-believers, we cannot completely account for all of their diverse experiences and motives for joining the State-Building project, but what we can be fairly certain of is that 30,000 or so foreigners and a larger but not massive amount of local jihadists cannot create a state alone. This too is not unique- no state can be exclusive to fanatics.

Accepting that the Islamic State phenomenon is not a completely unique occurrence in the history of state-building, the final conclusion that I suggest is that we should be able to learn something about our own society and our own history by studying ISIS. Understandably, the urge to self-extract and vehemently denounce such a brutal and senseless group is strong, especially in the public arena. Yet we should actively resist this sense of disconnectedness. Isn't it true that the formations of many European nations and the United States were marred by tragic violence, extremism, sectarian cleansings, and other forms of violence much akin to the acts of ISIS? If yes, then we must either reject the study of western history as senseless too, or accept the value in learning from, and by extension empathizing with the history of the Islamic State.

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