

The Islamic Proto-State: Assessing the Foreign Policy of a Potential Caliphate

Matthew Cross

A global coalition led by the United States of America has been constructed to defeat the Islamic State (IS, also known as the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant, ISIL/ISIS, or the Arabic acronym Da'esh). Current operations underway are focusing on efforts to retake Mosul, Iraq, with the eventual goal of recapturing all IS-controlled territories.¹ However, several important strategic impediments face the coalition: the IS maintains a narrow but deep root of support in the region, they use an unconventional and hyper-violent form of fighting, and they have claimed a significant amount of territory, thus placing themselves at the forefront of other conflicts.² Finally, and most importantly, the IS considers itself a legitimate caliphate and state, and has declared itself as such. The following paper will address this claim and assess the IS's foreign policy in terms of complex realism. This paper does not defend the legitimacy or illegitimacy of the IS's claim, but rather explores what would be the conventions of an IS proto-state.

Complex realism is used because it recognizes foreign policy as being developed and enacted in a complex international arena by self-concerned states. Moreover, it furthers the realist claim which identifies the relative balance of power as the driving force behind foreign policy by including state, regional, and global variables in its analysis. Through this lens, this paper will begin by delving into the foreign policy environment and regime type of the Islamic State. Additionally, an analysis of the state, regional, and global security environment of the Islamic State will be conducted. Finally, this understanding of the foreign policy and security environment of the Islamic State will be illustrated through a case study of the foreign policy response of the

Islamic State toward Syria.

Foreign policy consists of the attributes of a state's identity and orientations toward its neighbours, regional powers, and the global state system.³ The IS lays its foreign policy foundations in its identity of religious fundamentalism, conceptualizing itself as a militant manifestation of Muslim identity. This paves the way for its aggressive policies in trying to influence, control, and overtake territory in the region. The IS sees itself as the saviour of the Sunni Muslim world, in anticipation of the Day of Judgment, and as the legitimate state to which the true Muslim people will flock. Its foreign policy aggressively pursues the manifestation of this worldview.⁴ Furthermore, the IS identity includes a *modus operandi* of political terrorism reminiscent of earlier terror groups, such as Al-Qaeda, but with a claim of legitimacy to a fairly large region, giving it much more authority.

For the IS, the world around them is full of infidels. The IS is tied to a very particular set of Islamic legislature. Their ideology has been influenced by teachings that go back several hundred years, to Wahhabism. This is a view not altogether dissimilar to some of the traditions Saudi Arabia promulgates.⁵ With this ideology, "the interpretation or understanding of the Quran is to restore Islam's early days of glory through a jihad waged against internal and external enemies; the Salafist movement perceives the time of the Prophet Muhammad as ideal and the first Caliphs who succeeded him as role models."⁶ However, whether the IS acts as a distortion of these teachings is not being debated by the IS. Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, the IS's current leader and the latest of successive self-proclaimed caliphs, goes to great lengths to ensure that all of

the IS's actions are justified in the Quran or Hadith. Not unlike the other states in the region, their ideology is authoritarian, but is much more strongly based in the presence of an unwavering religious identity that seeps into every aspect of the state.⁷

The IS has institutionalized a belief of offensive realism, whereby obtaining territory is the primary goal. This goal supports the IS's further aspirations of a Sunni Muslim hegemony in the region, and ultimately the destruction of all non-believers.⁸ As a proto-state, the IS has not achieved the point where security is their priority. Instead, the state strives for legitimacy through force and terror. The IS ascribes to a particular strategic doctrine of radical violence; for example, IS fighters have destroyed thousands of years of culture in Mosul as a display of power and have spread propaganda videos of beheadings and burnings.⁹ In fact, the behavioural culture of the IS is noteworthy and is almost unlike anything seen before—it has combined the hyper-violence of a terrorist organization into state-mandated action that makes attacking or trying to contain it incredibly difficult.¹⁰ The IS's methods of governance are brutal and unjust, which makes it difficult to predict what the proto-state will do next or how they will respond to an attack.¹¹

At its peak, some 10 million people lived in IS-controlled territory, however current estimates hover around 6 million.¹² Geopolitically, the proto-state encompasses large and under-populated swaths of territory in both Iraq and Syria, yet these are both heavily contested and not politically recognized. The IS is a categorical 'hard' power, using guerrilla warfare and hyper-violence to achieve its goals. The state has almost no 'soft' power over allies, given that it is an unrecognized state and exerts its influence by attracting followers through ideology or from other terrorist organizations.¹³ Though unrecognized, the IS does wield a great deal of influence in the region, both as a military unit and a religious power. This has allowed the proto-state to hold their territories quite well in the face of Western opposition, despite its lack of allies.

To quote the Centre for the Analysis of Terrorism (CAT): "the theoretical value of assets under ISIS control (oil reserves, gas reserves, minerals, cash assets) was estimated at \$ 2,260 billion by the end of 2015, i.e. up 11% compared to late 2014."¹⁴ Its "economic model, unprecedented for a terrorist organization, is based upon its territorial control, which provides it with financial self-sufficiency and

diversified resources."¹⁵ Although this model was unsustainable in 2016, the value of IS holdings are still high due to their diversification and other means of cash flow.

One of the key ideas that separates the IS from other terrorist organizations is its regimental structure. As Col. Dr. Jacques Neriah of the Jerusalem Centre for Public Affairs notes:

IS is much more than a terrorist organization; it is a terrorist state with almost all governing elements. Over the last three years, since the beginning of the civil war in Syria, the Islamic State developed from an extremist fringe and marginal faction participating in the civil war to become the strongest, most ferocious, and best funded and best armed militia in the religious and ethnic war.¹⁶

The regime is a religious autocracy, a caliphate, headed by Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi.¹⁷

Little is known about Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, otherwise known as Caliph Ibrahim. Nonetheless, there is a general understanding that he is a brutal leader who retains full control over the foreign policy of the proto-state.¹⁸ Consequently, the IS is a regime "in which the power is personalized and concentrated, and especially in times of fluidity or crisis, [al-Baghdadi's] personal style, values, perceptions, and misperceptions make an enormous difference."¹⁹ This regime and leadership style has led to the IS-induced violence in the Middle East today. As caliph, al-Baghdadi is the sole decider in all decisions regarding the state, though this is not to say that he works alone.²⁰ The IS has developed an intricate governing structure based around a mix of regional administrations and national councils.

The IS elite is cohesive, to the extent that there appears to be almost no dissatisfaction within the leadership coordination. As a whole, the IS can be described as a risk-acceptant entity, opting for an aggressive foreign policy. Thanks to the religious doctrine holding them together, the IS rarely experiences in-fighting. As Neriah said, "even though little has been published about the structure governing the Islamic State—mainly for security reasons—the Islamic State seems to be partly composed of former military officers who served in the Iraqi Army until Saddam Hussein's ousting."²¹

The structure of the state is composed of five councils. The Military Council includes three members whose task is to plan and supervise the military commanders and the actual operations in the field.

The Shura (Consultative) Council is tasked with supervising state affairs. The Judicial Authority deals with all judicial issues as well as spreading the message of the Islamic State by means of recruitment and preaching. The Defense, Security and Intelligence Council is responsible for the personal security and safety of the Caliph; also serves to implement orders, campaigns, and judicial decisions and is responsible for the collection and dissemination of intelligence. The Islamic State Institution for Public Information is the propaganda wing of the IS.²²

The security environment of a state can be examined through three levels of analysis: state, the dimensions inside of a nation; regional, where the state fits relative to others in the region; and global, whether the state exists in a one-power or two-power system.²³

One must also note that the IS is, as Graeme Wood described, a hermit kingdom.²⁴ It enjoys a small but fiercely loyal level of support that is spread thin throughout a region where every one of its 'neighbours' wants it destroyed. As previously stated, the state has the absolute obedience of its people. Estimates suggest that areas the IS can tax had a pre-war population between 2.8 million and 5.3 million people.²⁵ This population is, for the most part, non-revolutionary. This is most likely out of fear of violent backlash from the government's incredibly strict religious police, who control the region using propaganda displaying the might of the state, and violence to quell any subversion.²⁶ Since the proto-state does not have globally recognized borders, it is difficult to fully understand the social divisions that exist within the state. However, given that its region encompasses large swaths of Iraq and Syria, it is likely that the state has the same social cleavages between Sunni and Shi'a, and Arab and non-Arab.²⁷ Within the area the IS controls, there is opposition from both non-Sunnis and Sunnis who view the actions of the IS as illegitimate.²⁸

Regionally, the IS does not have political affiliations in the conventional sense, given that it is not a globally recognized state. However, what does merit consideration in this regard is its influence in the region. The proto-state is decidedly anti-Western, promotes violence against opposition groups, and is politically weak in the region.²⁹ Other than a few splintered terrorist organizations, the IS has almost no allies in the regions that it controls. Moreover, its enemies include: the Iraqi government and military, Shia militias, Kurdish fighters in Iraq and

Syria, the Syrian regime, the U.S.A., Iran, Turkey, Saudi Arabia, and the Lebanese militants Hezbollah.³⁰ Given the balance of power in the region being tilted so heavily against them, however, it is remarkable that the proto-state has managed to stay intact and sustain relatively few losses (at the time of writing, Mosul—an IS stronghold—has still not been fully captured, despite a global coalition trying to do so). The proto-state possesses relatively poor military capabilities but has a large army and is risk-acceptant, leading them to invade and attempt to control new territory regularly.³¹

In the current one-power world, the IS has an antagonistic relationship with the hegemony of the U.S.A.³² The IS seeks to promote a view that is threatened by cultural globalization. Consequently, the IS invests heavily in controlling the discourse of the region.³³

The culmination of the IS's foreign policy can be observed in its current role in the Syrian conflict. For instance, Ruth Sherlock notes that:

Over the last three years, since the first stirrings of the civil war in Syria, the Islamic State – formerly ISIS – has burgeoned from an extremist fringe group to the strongest, best funded and best armed militia in modern history. The group became flush with cash from revenues of selling oil from the fields it controls in Syria's northern province of Deir al-Zour.³⁴

The IS grew out of what was al-Qaeda in Iraq. They quickly became a major force in the country's sectarian insurgency. According to BBC News, the group joined a rebellion against Syria's Bashar al-Assad, giving it access to weapons and personnel in 2011. At the same time, the US' withdrawal from Iraq—as well as anger from the Sunni population at the country's Shia-led government—created a power vacuum in the region, one that the IS filled.³⁵ In 2013, the group began seizing territories in the region and officially changed its name to ISIS—the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant. The following year, ISIS overran large swathes of northern and western Iraq, claimed a caliphate, and changed their name to the Islamic State.³⁶

The IS's role in Syria is complex. The IS responded to the power vacuum with aggressive territorial expansion. However, given that the proto-state is not an actual state, its foreign policy does not align with a conventional state policy.³⁷ For instance, the IS does not concern itself with balance of power politics like Iran would and does not have to as-

tribute to conventions of warfare or military sportsmanship.³⁸ The IS has been able to move aggressively in the region, even without the aid of allies, using the discord in Syria to annex territory.

The arrival of the IS in Syria has proved a further headache for all conflicting parties in the state, specifically around Aleppo. Many actors, including the Free Syrian Army, the Assad Regime, Turkey, and the USA, are already gridlocked in trying to fight for territorial dominance. An added complexity is that many of the parties that are denouncing and fighting the IS are the ones who initially supplied and funded it. Among them were Turkey and the USA.³⁹ The IS is a creation of the in-fighting that has occurred in the region. By continuing attacks and disrupting peace talks, they have made resolution difficult to achieve.⁴⁰

In terms of the IS's territorial ambitions, sometimes the territory they appear to dominate does not have any strategic importance, but rather a religious significance. As Wood said:

The Islamic State has attached great importance to the Syrian city of Dabiq, near Aleppo. It named its propaganda magazine after the town, and celebrated madly when (at great cost) it conquered Dabiq's strategically unimportant plains. It is here, the Prophet reportedly said, that the armies of Rome will set up their camp. The armies of Islam will meet them, and Dabiq will be Rome's Waterloo or its Antietam.⁴¹

Wood's statement is further supported by the fact that the aimed result of the IS is a caliphate that sees the Day of Judgement come to fruition.

This paper has engaged in an exploration of the claims made by an unprecedented political group. In closing, however, one thing must be reiterated: the Islamic State, ISIS, Da'esh, or however else it may be called, is not a recognized state, but a violent terrorist organisation. However, the Islamic State has managed to somewhat successfully do what no other Muslim terrorist organisation has done: establish an existing, though contested, caliphate. The IS is notably different from any other terrorist organization seen before—it is not only ultra-violent and fundamentalist, but also operates as though it were a state. Its leader, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, is a charismatic megalomaniac supported by an incredibly loyal cast of former Iraqi military leaders and terrorist organizers. Despite having almost no allies, the IS has managed to retain territory in a region marred by instability and crisis—a lot of which it caused itself. In Syria, the IS has been aggressive in its claim for territory. Recently, the proto-state has been losing key battlegrounds in both Iraq and Syria, which suggests uncertainty for the future of the IS. However, it is unlikely that the IS will be disappearing anytime soon, even if it does not survive as a proto-state. Indeed, perhaps it is a sign of a new kind of state: shifting, uncertain, and ready for the unconventional fight.

Notes

1. Kathleen J. McInnis, *Coalition Contributions to Countering the Islamic State*, Washington, DC: Congressional Research Service, 2016, 1–12.
2. McInnis.
3. Louise Fawcett, *International Relations of the Middle East*, 4th ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016).
4. Graeme Wood, “What ISIS Really Wants,” *The Atlantic*, March 2015, <http://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2015/03/what-isis-really-wants/384980/>.
5. John Pedler, *A Word Before Leaving: The Weltanschauung of a Former Diplomat* (Kibworth Beauchamp: Matador, 2015; Google Books), <https://books.google.ie/books?id=A8nuBQA-AQBAJ>.
6. “ISIS: Portrait of a Jihadi Terrorist Organization,” The Meir Amit Intelligence and Terrorism Information Center, November 26, 2014, accessed December 01, 2016, <http://www.terrorism-info.org.il/en/article/20733>.
7. Nasser al-Falasi, “ISIS: An Islamic Identity or a National One?” *Nasser al-Falasi* (blog), October 16, 2014, <http://www.nassakb.com/isis-an-islamic-identity-or-a-national-one/>.
8. Jonathan Eyal and Elizabeth Quintana, *Inherently Unresolved: Regional Politics and the Counter-ISIS Campaign*, Occasional Papers, September 25, 2015, accessed December 1, 2016, <https://rusi.org/publication/occasional-papers/inherently-unresolved-regional-politics-and-counter-isis-campaign>.
9. Wood, “What ISIS Really Wants.”
10. Bethan McKernan, “Thousands of Years of Culture,” *The Independent*, November 15, 2016, <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/middle-east/isis-mosul-iraq-army-terrorists-destroy>.
11. Eyal and Quintana, *Inherently Unresolved*.
12. BBC News, “Islamic State and the Crisis in Iraq and Syria in Maps,” *BBC News*, accessed December 1, 2016, <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-27838034>.
13. Harleen Gambhir, *ISIS’s Global Strategy: A War-game*, issue brief no. 28, July 2015, accessed December 1, 2016, <http://www.understanding-war.org/sites/default/files/ISIS>.
14. Laurence Binder and Gabriel Poirot, *ISIS Financing in 2015*, Center for the Analysis of Terrorism, 2016, accessed December 1, 2016, <http://cat-int.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/06/ISIS-Financing-2015-Report.pdf>.
15. Binder and Poirot, *ISIS Financing in 2015*; and Jacques Neriah, “The Structure of the Islamic State (ISIS),” Jerusalem Center for Public Affairs, 2014, accessed December 1, 2016, <http://jcpa.org/structure-of-the-islamic-state/>.
16. Neriah.
17. Adam Withnall, “Iraq Crisis: ISIS,” *The Independent*, June 30, 2014, <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/middle-east/isis-declares-new-islamic-state-in-middle-east>.
18. Fawcett, *International Relations of the Middle East*.
19. Fawcett.
20. Neriah, “The Structure of the Islamic State (ISIS).”
21. Neriah.
22. Ruth Sherlock, “Inside the Leadership of Islamic State,” *The Telegraph*, July 09, 2014, accessed December 1, 2016, <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/middleeast/iraq/10956280/>.
23. Wood, “What ISIS Really Wants.”
24. Eli Berman and Jacob Shapiro, “Why ISIL Will Fail on Its Own,” *Politico Magazine*, November 29, 2015, <http://www.politico.com/magazine/story/2015/11/why-isil-will-fail-on-its-own-213401>.
25. Eli Berman and Jacob Shapiro.
26. Eli Berman and Jacob Shapiro.
27. Sherlock, “Inside the Leadership of Islamic State.”
28. Wood, “What ISIS Really Wants.”
29. “ISIS: Allies and Enemies,” *CBC News*, accessed December 1, 2016, <http://www.cbc.ca/news2/interactives/isis-allies-enemies/interactive.html>.
30. “Weapons of ISIS,” Military Factory, accessed December 1, 2016, <http://www.military-factory.com/smallarms/weapons-of-isis.asp>.
31. Robert Spencer and Christine Williams, “Jihad Watch,” Jihad Watch, 2016, accessed December 1, 2016, <https://www.jihadwatch.org/>.
32. Nathan Mendeleyis, “More Ethnic than Religious: How the Islamic State Uses Religion to Attract Allies,” *Salon*, November 20, 2015,

https://www.salon.com/2015/11/20/isis_phony_religious_message_how_the_islamic_state_attracts_allies/.

33. Sherlock, "Inside the Leadership of Islamic State."

34. BBC News, "Islamic State and the Crisis in Iraq and Syria in Maps."

35. BBC News.

36. Fawcett, *International Relations of the*

Middle East.

37. Eyal and Quintana, *Inherently Unresolved*.

38. BBC News, "Islamic State and the Crisis in Iraq and Syria in Maps."

39. Fawcett, *International Relations of the Middle East*.

40. Eyal and Quintana, *Inherently Unresolved*.

41. Wood, "What ISIS Really Wants."