The Islamic State: Governance and Civilian Consolidation

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In 2004, Abu Bakr Naji, a philosopher and strategist of the al-Qaeda movement, published a book entitled *The Management of Savagery*, in which he presented an organized plan for disseminating jihadist ideas throughout the world and founding an Islamic caliphate. The book's title was a reference to a chaotic "interim situation" between the decline of one ruler and the rise of another.[1] One decade later, whether or not through Naji's direct influence, the idea began to materialize under the direction of the Islamic State, which sprouted from a branch of al-Qaeda in Iraq. In fact, the stages of the establishment of the Islamic State recall the course charted in *Management of Savagery*, especially in terms of the nature of Islamic State governance in the currently chaotic regions of Syria and Iraq.

The announcement in June 2014 of the founding of an Islamic caliphate by the organization's leader, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, turned the Islamic State from yet another violent Salafi jihadist terrorist organization into an entity responsible for the daily lives of millions of residents of the territories it conquered in Syria and Iraq. Since then, the Islamic State has integrated itself into the civilian population and cultivated signs of governance. In other words, it has come to manage a civilian system and maintain control over a population in a given territory in a manner similar to that of a state.

Governance by violent organizations is not a new phenomenon; examples date back to as early as the eighteenth century (e.g., with slave leader Toussaint Louverture during the civil war in Haiti). Later examples can be found in Colombia, Indonesia, Nigeria, Sri Lanka, and more recently, with Hezbollah in Lebanon and Hamas in the Gaza Strip.

The Islamic State's Forms of Governance

The Islamic State's nation-building process is based on three concepts that feed on each other: idea, utility, and coercion. These are translated into practice and into institutions that aim to further its consolidation.

On the ideological level, the Islamic State operates through a range of mechanisms that help spread its ideology and implement *sharia*. In the summer of 2013 courts of religious law were established in northern Syria, and approximately one year later in Iraq, to adjudicate disputes between residents as well as between residents and Islamic State operatives. Interestingly, like other governing organizations, the Islamic State places a high priority on establishing courts, and started doing so at an early stage of its civilian establishment.[2] Like its other enforcement mechanisms, the court system has been designed to demonstrate the organization's power, reinforce its status as a ruling entity among civilians, and prove its effectiveness in managing civilian life.

Another key way in which the Islamic State aims to entrench its religious ideology is through the establishment of schools. In Iraq, it seized control of the University of Mosul. In Syria (Aleppo and al-Raqqa) it set up elementary and high schools for the local population as well as for the families of foreign volunteers (whose instruction takes place in English).[3] The educational system is based on an independent curriculum focused on religious studies; it insists on separate classrooms for women and men, and forbids the study of "Western" disciplines (philosophy, psychology, history, and music) or any other subjects inconsistent with its perception of the values of Islam.[4] Along with these measures, the Islamic State tries to erase civilians' former identities – for example, in destroying archives, destroying the antiquities of other religions and civilizations, and even issuing passports and minting gold coins in the name of the Islamic caliphate.[5]

On the utilitarian level, the Islamic State offers the population material rewards in the form of cash grants, services, and humanitarian aid, such as food and water, clothing, fuel, electricity, and medical and sanitation services. Public relations offices occasionally publish video clips that aim to instill the message that routine daily life and commerce continue undisturbed in the city. The clips show Islamic State operatives cleaning and repairing streets, maintaining power lines and irrigation canals, and operating a food market, a soup kitchen for the needy, an orphanage, and even a hotel.[6]

This aspect of governance is designed to confirm legitimacy and win support from the population. It demonstrates the Islamic State's ability to provide order and security, as well as basic goods and services that allow people to lead normal daily lives, which previously were possible only to some degree, if at all, due to the ineptness of the local state regimes and the chaos overcoming the area.

Finally, the means of consolidation most closely identified with the Islamic State are coercion, fear, and violence. In addition to its regular police force (*al-shurta al-Islamiya*), it operates a morality police corps (*al-hasba*), whose job is to enforce Islamic religious law and acceptable codes of behavior. It has also devised a method for collecting taxes from the population, which it refers to as "charity." In Syria, for example, residents of the Islamic State are required to pay a monthly tax of 1,500 Syrian lira (about $8.30). Anyone who does not pay this fee risks beatings, kidnapping, and even execution.[7]

Stages in Civilian Consolidation

The features of the Islamic State's civilian consolidation and nation-building processes, as they occurred in al-Raqqa in Syria and Mosul in Iraq, resemble those of other organizations, and are likely to indicate future Islamic State strategy, in territories already conquered and areas it may conquer in the future.

In most cases, armed organizations do not establish governance in the initial stages of their activity, but only after a developmental period that culminates with control over a given territory. Before February 2014, when it was still operating as an al-Qaeda branch in Iraq, the Islamic State concentrated on military operations. However, since then (in part even as early as late 2013), it has established civilian institutions as part of its vision of an Islamic caliphate, but also for the purpose of obtaining power, support, and stability, while preserving its organizational relevance and legitimacy.

The Islamic State's consolidation strategy is based on a dynamic of juggling the three concepts mentioned above: idea, utility, and coercion. Accordingly, the first stage consists of a military takeover (coercion). Once it has a grip on the territory, it shifts to utility, and develops basic social services, while "buying" the residents' trust through benefits and rewards. In terms of ideology, one of the Islamic State's first acts is to erect billboards around the city that proclaim the importance of religion, jihad, and *sharia*.

Next, the Islamic State takes over existing institutions and redefines them under its identity (usually by hanging its flag from their buildings). The first institutions it usually takes over are courts (as occurred in northern Syria),[8] which is not technically difficult, requires few resources, and generally does not rouse public disapproval. At a later stage, it broadens its ideological message by creating coercive religious mechanisms, while establishing educational systems. The level of complexity demanded by the creation of educational institutions is higher, since these require professionals and experts. At the same time, the organization makes it easier for people to adjust to the new situation by offering them humanitarian aid (again a utilitarian measure). Only at a subsequent stage, after its consolidation in the territory, does the Islamic State add more complicated services, such as electricity and water.

After its utilitarian and ideological consolidation, it steps up coercive mechanisms and threats directed at the population. Violent enforcement agencies are created only at this advanced stage, since excessive intimidation runs the risk of losing popular support. This explains why the Islamic State's morality police, which is perceived as threatening and inflexible, was established in Syria (Aleppo and al-Raqqa) only in the spring of 2015, after other governance mechanisms were already in place.[9]

One strategy of the Islamic State is to use local leaders and tribal heads to fill bureaucratic positions and operate various institutions. It hires them as technocrats in their area of expertise, be it health care, education, management, or accounting. This allows the Islamic State to enhance its legitimacy by co-opting potential opponents, minimizing the resources needed to train new personnel, and creating dependency and affinity between organizations and people.

The Significance of the Islamic State's Civilian Establishment

As with other violent organizations, the consolidation of the Islamic State's civilian governance does not necessarily indicate a process of total institutionalization that will conclude with the abandonment of a military struggle. Rather, it means that it manages civilian activity as it continues to engage in military activity. For the Islamic State, the interface between civilian and military identities fosters a source of strength and a broader support base than those of other violent organizations that do not govern. Consequently, this is liable to make dealing with the Islamic State more difficult. At the same time, a closer look reveals that despite the growing

strength of the Islamic State, strain and weak points are appearing due to tension between the two identities.

The first weak point concerns the Islamic State's ability to win concrete support and legitimacy from the public, given the tension between its cruel, violent, and intimidating image and its self-portrayal as a social movement beneficial to citizens and their welfare. The fear it casts over the population may undermine its efforts to integrate the population into a "state" and reduce the use of services and facilities that it offers. Popular support for the Islamic State is therefore likely to remain superficial and fear-based, and consequently be temporary and unstable.

Second, although civilian establishment is likely to increase support for the Islamic State, it comes at a price that it may not be able to pay in the long term. Governance requires capabilities, experience, professionals, and administrative personnel, as well as a large reserve of resources and money to enable the Islamic State to achieve its ambitious vision. Despite its income, estimated in March 2015 at $2 billion per year,[10] it appears that the Islamic State is hard pressed to maintain governance on an ongoing and stable basis. Its difficulties stem from a shortage of professional and trained personnel to operate infrastructure efficiently and according to an overall plan. Thus, for example, its incompetent use of the Tabqa Dam in Syria caused a significant drop in the water level of the nearby Assad River, which cut the supply of water in the area of Aleppo and al-Raqqa.

Finally, a weak point typical of any violent organization undergoing institutionalization and establishing a social or political wing is the emergence of military targets for its opponent. From an organization that initially operated with a low signature and relied on patterns of disappearance and concealment on the battlefield has emerged an Islamic State with an "address," concrete institutions, and exposed officeholders that can serve as targets of attack. Thus, after the first air raids by the international coalition, which included two attacks on the Islamic State's civilian facilities at al-Raqqa, Islamic State operatives blended into the population by reducing their presence in government institutions during the day (at roadblocks and administrative offices, for example), and renewed their activity only after dark.[11]

In conclusion, the Islamic State's ambition to govern is an expression of its strength and its power of attraction. At the same time, it may well prove to be its Achilles' heel. In the long term, the capabilities and resources

needed by the Islamic State to manage a country will have to grow in direct proportion to its expansion.

The violent military dimension at the core of the nature and deeds of the Islamic State converges with ideological and utilitarian dimensions that grant it the appearance of a government. Recognition of this and the tensions generated by it in the various theaters in which the Islamic State operates is a key to formulating effective ways to deal with it. Hence, an effective solution cannot be confined to a military operation, for it will also require civilian and political efforts. As long as there is no sustainable alternative to the political governance for the populations living in the Islamic State territories, the Islamic State is liable to continue to attract people who do not necessarily identify with its ideological and religious idea. In the long term, supporting and guiding local parties in creating a just civil infrastructure and fair political representation are likely to provide a solution for the population, and thus detract from the attraction of the Islamic State.

Notes

1 Abu Bakr Naji, *The Management of Savagery: The Most Critical Stage through which the Umma Will Pass* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University, 2006), https://azelin.files.wordpress.com/2010/08/abu-bakr-naji-the-management-of-savagery-the-most-critical-stage-through-which-the-umma-will-pass.pdf.

2 As happened, for example, in the case of the Tamil Tigers (LTTE) in Sri Lanka, the Sudan People's Liberation Movement (SPLM), and the Rally for Congolese Democracy (RCD) in the Congo.

3 "ISIS Opens English-Language Schools in Syria's Raqqa: Report," *al-Arabiya News*, February 24, 2015, http://english.alarabiya.net/en/perspective/features/2015/02/24/ISIS-opens-English-language-schools-in-Syria-s-Raqqa-report-.html.

4 Aymenn Jawad Al-Tamimi, "Aspects of Islamic State (IS) Administration in Ninawa Province," January 17, 2015, http://www.aymennjawad.org/15946/aspects-of-islamic-state-is-administration-in.

5 "ISIS Issues Passports to Attract Supporters around the World," *al-Aarabiya*, August 17, 2014, http://goo.gl/2CKuOa.

6 "ISIS New Propaganda Video – John Cantlie Report From Mosul Iraq," *YouTube,* January 4, 2015, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RN3ktXbLzlY.

7 Sarah Almuktar, "ISIS Finances Are Strong," *New York Times*, May 19, 2015, http://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2015/05/19/world/middleeast/isis-finances.html.

8 Charles C. Caris and Samuel Reynolds, "ISIS Governance in Syria," *Middle East Security Report*, Institute for the Study of War, July 2014, http://www.understandingwar.org/sites/default/files/ISIS_Governance.pdf.

9 Ibid.
10 John Hall, "Are ISIS Earning MORE than $2billion a Year? New Study of Terror Group's Income Suggests Previous Estimates Are Far Too Low," *Mail Online*, March 20, 2015, http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-3003919/Are-ISIS-earning-2billion-year-New-study-terror-group-s-income-suggests-previous-estimates-far-low.html.
11 Sarah Birke, "How ISIS Rules?," *NYR Daily*, February 5, 2015, http://www.nybooks.com/blogs/nyrblog/2014/dec/09/how-isis-rules/.