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**Brutalisation as a Survival Strategy:  
How the “Islamic State” is Prolonging  
Its Doomsday Battle**

Stephan Rosiny

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GIGA German Institute of Global and Area Studies

Leibniz-Institut für Globale und Regionale Studien

Neuer Jungfernstieg 21

20354 Hamburg

Germany

<[info@giga-hamburg.de](mailto:info@giga-hamburg.de)>

<[www.giga-hamburg.de](http://www.giga-hamburg.de)>

# **Brutalisation as a Survival Strategy: How the “Islamic State” Is Prolonging Its Doomsday Battle**

## **Abstract**

The recent bomb attacks at the Istanbul airport (28 June 2016), in a tourist cafe in Dhaka, Bangladesh (2 July), and in Bagdad (3 July) were part of a “Ramadan campaign” announced by the spokesman of the self-declared “Islamic State” caliphate in late May 2016. This series of attacks was intended to make the Islamic holy month of Ramadan “a month of calamity everywhere for the non-believers.” It has generated significant international attention for an organisation which has recently lost the cities of Ramadi and Falluja in Iraq and which is under serious pressure in the strategic city of Manbij in Syria.

This article analyses the Islamic State’s (IS) contextual use of different forms of violence and argues that the attacks and the defeats are two sides of one coin: the group is losing territory and credibility by failing to continue with its expansion of the universal Islamic caliphate that “Caliph” Abu Bakr promised in summer 2014; it is now compensating for these territorial losses by expanding its field of action through terrorist attacks, thereby suggesting a fictitious expansion. The article explains how the group has exhibited a three-stage “cycle of violence” in which violence has served specific functions. In the first stage, from roughly 2003 to 2010, violence was used as part of a mobilisation strategy. In the second stage, from 2010 to 2015, violence served mainly to facilitate the group’s expansion and rule. In the third stage, which began in 2015, the increasingly brutal violence and the fictitious expansion have constituted the centrepiece of a survival strategy. Against this background, the article suggests that the Islamic State will most likely not have a future as a territorial entity but will, at best, survive as a terrorist apocalyptic sect.

Keywords: Iraq, ISIS, Islamic State, Syria, terrorism, violence

## **Dr. Stephan Rosiny**

is a research fellow at the GIGA Institute of Middle East Studies. He is a political scientist and a specialist in Islamic studies. His regional focus is the eastern countries of the Middle East, and his research deals primarily with contemporary Islamic movements, peace and conflict studies, and power-sharing. He heads the research project “Power-Sharing in Multi-Ethnic Societies of the Middle East” at the GIGA.

<stephan.rosiny@giga-hamburg.de>

<www.giga-hamburg.de/en/team/rosiny>

# **Brutalisation as a Survival Strategy: How the “Islamic State” Is Prolonging Its Doomsday Battle**

**Stephan Rosiny**

## **Article Outline**

- 1 The Islamic State’s “Cycle of Violence”
- 2 First Stage: Terrorist Violence as an Instrument of Mobilisation
- 3 Second Stage: Violence as a Means to Expand and Rule a Territory
- 4 Third Stage: Brutalisation as a Survival Strategy
- 5 No Future for the Islamic State

Bibliography

## **1 The Islamic State’s “Cycle of Violence”**

Religious fervour and brutal practices have allowed the Islamic State (IS)<sup>1</sup> to fuse a political success story involving the conquering of huge territories with a salvific narrative of re-establishing the caliphate that will one day rule the whole globe (McCants 2015). Many journalists and scholars have followed and described the ascent of IS (Günther 2014; Hashim 2014) and its state formation (Bunzel 2015), examining aspects such as the group’s govern-

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1 IS is a jihadist organisation that stems from al-Qaeda in Iraq (AQI). It has changed its name and composition several times. Between 2006 and 2013, the militia proclaimed an Islamic State of Iraq (ISI) and redefined itself accordingly. In 2013 it expanded into Syria, renaming itself The Islamic State in Iraq and Sham (ISIS). In summer 2014, ISIS dropped its territorial limitation and took on the name Islamic State (IS).

ance in Syria and Iraq (Caris and Reynolds 2014), its use of social media (Ajbaili 2015; Al Qassemi 2015; Berger and Morgan 2015; Klausen 2015), its appeal to foreign fighters (Ahmed and PISOIU 2014; Carter, Maher, and Neumann 2014; Franz 2015; Neumann 2015), the risk that returnees pose for Western societies (Byman 2015), its competition within the jihadist spectrum (Byman and Williams 2015), its connectedness to Baathist networks (Reuter 2015a; Reuter 2015b), its ideological parallels to Wahhabism in Saudi Arabia (Bunzel 2016), and its global franchising of new IS cells (Azoulay 2015; Chinyong Liow 2016; Jones 2015). Despite the extreme violence that has set IS apart from other global terrorist groups, little attention has been given to the group's specific use of this violence over the course of its development.

This article provides an in-depth account of the different forms of violence practised by IS and distinguishes between them in terms of their contextual and functional attributes. It analyses them in chronological order using a "cycle of violence" model which describes and dissects the transformation of IS violence, looking at the strategic shifts that have taken place during the three stages of this cycle and how these have been related to the group's rise and decline as a territorial entity.

Section 2 discusses how IS, in a first stage, utilised violence as a tactic to instigate sectarian hatred and mobilise Iraq's Sunni community against the Shia. Section 3 then outlines the group's use of violence as an instrument of expansion and rule. The following section examines the most recent stage of the Islamic State's violent tactics: its use of brutalisation and a fictitious expansion narrative as a survival strategy. The article's final section analyses IS's overarching cycle of violence and derives some general lessons from it.

## 2 First Stage: Terrorist Violence as an Instrument of Mobilisation

To understand the Islamic State's violent tactics, it is imperative to understand the group's roots as a jihadist militia that grew out of the 2003 US-led invasion and subsequent occupation, until 2011, of Iraq. In this first stage of the cycle of violence, the evolving al-Qaeda franchise used violence as a strategy to encourage the mobilisation of the Sunni community against the common enemies. The infamous Jordanian jihadist Abu Mus'ab al-Zarqawi spearheaded this mobilisation as a resistance movement to expel the Western "crusaders," to exterminate the Shia "rejectionist" (*rafida*) sect, to overthrow the newly formed, alien "Safawid" Iraqi government, and to castigate insubordinate Sunni Muslims.<sup>2</sup> These broad and extremist goals laid the foundation for thousands of attacks and suicide bomb attacks,

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2 The Safawi dynasty ruled Iran between 1501 and 1722. It was engaged in a struggle for power with the Ottoman Empire over contemporary Iraqi territory. Today this pejorative term denounces a presumed Iranian expansionism into Arab territory. Calling Arab Shiites Safawids depicts them as betrayers of the Arab cause. Denouncing Shiites as *rafida* (rejectionists) refers to their refusal to accept the first three caliphs as righteous caliphs. Both pejorative terms have come to be commonly used by Sunni Islamists and Arab nationalists to delegitimise Arab Shiites' Islamic beliefs and Arab national identity; see Siegel (2015).

which were executed on a nearly daily basis. Zarqawi was notorious for his role in the beheadings of Western hostages. The video recordings of these murders became infamous in the Western world due to the media attention they received. They sent the crucial message to all viewers that this jihadist group did not feel restrained by any moral barriers in striving for its ultimate goal of erecting an "Islamic State" in Iraq.

Zarqawi's primary aim, however, was to instigate a sectarian civil war against the Shia majority community, which had become Iraq's new political elite. Bomb attacks against religious processions, religious authorities, holy sites, and residential areas were intended to provoke Shiite retaliation towards the Sunni community. The heightened tensions resulting from these attacks were to act as a catalyst to estrange the two Muslim communities, igniting a sectarian civil war and ultimately mobilising Sunnis in self-defence. Evidence of this plan is contained in a letter from Zarqawi to al-Qaeda's vice leader, Ayman al-Zawahiri, written in February 2004:

If we are able to strike them [the Shia] with one painful blow after another until they enter the battle, we will be able to [re]shuffle the cards. Then, no value or influence will remain to the Governing Council or even to the Americans, who will enter a second battle with the Shi'a. This is what we want, and, whether they like it or not, many Sunni areas will stand with the mujahidin [the jihadists of al-Qaida in Iraq (AQI)]. (al-Zarqawi 2004)

This early stage of the cycle of violence fulfilled the criteria of terrorism as defined by Peter Waldmann, who states that it is "deemed to denote well prepared, shocking, and violent attacks against a political order from the underground. They should mainly spread insecurity and terror, but should also generate sympathy and support readiness" (Waldmann 1998: 12). AQI utilised violence to demonstrate its power and generate legitimacy by leading the Sunni community. In 2006, this newfound confidence led to its proclamation of an Islamic State of Iraq (ISI), even though it hardly controlled any territory at that time (Günther 2014).

The group's tactic, however, was a disaster. The Shia community refrained from revenge attacks against their Sunni fellow citizens until 2006. Then, early that year, on 22 February, a massive bomb attack destroyed the holy Shrine of the Two Imams in Samarra. This attack prompted Shia militias to retaliate, and thus initiated the intended sectarian civil war. Mutual "ethnic cleansing" campaigns led to the estrangement of both communities and almost to their physical segregation. In fact, the excessive use of violence against Shiites backfired against the Sunni community because it lost even more of its political influence and prosperity through the civil war. This undermined ISI's legitimacy and even led to a Sunni counter-insurgency. With US military support and funding, Sunni tribal fighters formed the Sons of Iraq (Abna' al-Iraq), also known as the Awakening Movement, which confronted and forced back ISI. By 2010, the number of ISI fighters had declined to one-tenth of its former total. A shadow of its former self, the group reverted to its underground terrorist tactics.

### 3 Second Stage: Violence as a Means to Expand and Rule a Territory

The year 2010 marked a decisive turn in the fate of ISI: its "emir," Abu Umar al-Baghdadi, and its leader, Abu Hamza al-Muhajir, were both killed in a joint raid by US and Iraqi forces on 18 April near Tikrit. Within a month of their deaths, the Shura Council of the Islamic State appointed Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi as the new emir. This change in leadership marked the beginning of the second stage of the cycle of violence. In a shift of strategy, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi integrated leading Baathists into the ranks of his organisation. He also sent a group of his fighters into the Syrian civil war and initiated a conquest and renewed state-building process that ultimately led to the proclamation of a transnational Islamic State and a caliphate.

#### 3.1 *The Merger with the Baathists*

Under Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi's guidance many former members of Saddam Hussein's Baath regime, which had been dominated by the Sunni Arab minority in Iraq, began playing a crucial role in the leadership of the jihadist movement. The common resentment against the Shia "cheaters" for their perceived collaboration with the US invaders helped bridge the ideological gap between fundamentalist Islamists and more or less secular nationalists. After 2003, many Baathists had participated in the resistance against the foreign occupation and the newly Shia-dominated state authorities, under which they felt discriminated against. Furthermore, leading Baathists and al-Qaeda jihadists had been detained together in the prisons of Abu Ghraib and Camp Bucca, where they had established ties to fight their common enemies (Chulov 2014).

From 2010 on, the merging of religious-fundamentalist Salafism and nationalist Baathism helped ISI to transform from a terrorist underground militia into rudimentary statehood (Reuter 2015b). For example, the perfidious intelligence service, the devilishly gruesome torture methods, and the other forms of tyrannical rule that ISI demonstrates are similar to those of the former Baathist regime. Furthermore, ISI inherited the networks for smuggling contraband oil to Turkey that Baathists had established during the long sanctions regime against Iraq from 1990 until 2003.

#### 3.2 *Territorial Expansion into Syria and Iraq*

In 2011 Baghdadi sent a segment of his organisation into Syria to participate in the ongoing civil war there. It formed the Nusra Front, the Syrian branch of al-Qaeda, which became an important actor in the Syrian civil war and attracted many jihadists from all over the world. In 2013 Baghdadi's growing Iraqi militia entered Syria and he proclaimed the reunification of the two wings into the Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham (ISIS). However, neither the self-reliant Nusra Front nor the al-Qaeda leadership acknowledged this merger. Baghdadi's militia started using targeted assassinations and bomb attacks to overpower his rivals, and the internal struggle between the various jihadist groups resulted in the deaths of thousands of

their members (Bunzel 2014). Despite temporary military setbacks and even being excluded from al-Qaeda, ISIS continued its expansion in Syria and gained control of Raqqa, which became its first capital, as well as of oil wells, which helped generate further income. Many foreign fighters quit the Nusra Front and other jihadist militias and joined ISIS because of its eschatological messages and its victory narrative.

As of December 2013, ISIS redirected its expansion and invaded deep into Iraq, where it took the city of Falluja in January 2014. In a second wave in June it conquered further territory, including the city of Tikrit and Iraq's second-largest city, Mosul. Excessive violence and asymmetric warfare methods proved very beneficial as an expansion technique and compensated for the relatively small number of combatants. It is estimated that 31,500 fighters, roughly half of them foreigners and 5,000 of them Europeans, had joined ISIS by 2014 (BBC News 2014). This force was much smaller numerically than the Iraqi and Syrian armies it ousted. In the battle of Mosul in summer 2014, 30,000 Iraqi soldiers and 500,000 residents fled a militia supposedly made up of 1,500 jihadist warriors.

Religious zeal enabled ISIS fighters to perpetrate daring military attacks and human wave operations that took their enemies by surprise. In massive shock offensives, suicide bombers blew up army checkpoints, opening the way for mobile phalanxes of pickups filled with fighters. Bomb attacks behind the enemy lines and acts of sabotage supported the offensive. ISIS recorded and released videos showing their militants shooting at civilians passing in their cars, the explosion of buildings containing prisoners who were probably still alive, the sadistic cutting of prisoners' throats with dull knives as militia members looked on and insulted them with dehumanising language, and the shooting of thousands of Shia and minority soldiers and prisoners. As these gruesome assassination videos circulated on the Internet,<sup>3</sup> ISIS was able to instil panic amongst the regional defenders. Many of them rid themselves of their uniforms and abandoned large caches of weapons. This made it possible for ISIS to loot huge amounts of advanced US-made weaponry, further facilitating its territorial advance (McCoy 2014). Those unable to escape were captured, imprisoned and segregated based on their sectarian affiliation. On 11 June 2014, up to 1,700 mainly Shiite soldiers from the Camp Speicher military base in Tikrit were shot in mass executions. The previous day, 600 Shia, Kurdish, and Yazidi inmates of Badoush Prison had been executed after being separated out from their Sunni fellow captives (Human Rights Watch 2014).

In addition to brute force, ISIS's looting of a huge fortune and of essential resources was another factor in its success. As of 2013, the group controlled most of the Syrian oil fields; as of 2014, it also controlled oil wells and installations in northern Iraq. In summer 2014, ISIS gained control of Mosul, which it made its new, self-proclaimed capital. This victory expanded the group's monetary assets significantly, by "somewhere between \$500 million and \$1 billion," especially as a result of its "taking over about 80 bank branches in Iraq"

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3 The author has watched such videos, which are for the most part no longer available online. (See 'Islamic State Video: 36 Minutes of Propaganda and Mass Executions in Iraq' 2014).



(McLaughlin 2015). ISIS also profited monetarily by seizing and selling the abandoned property of state employees and members of minority communities who had either escaped or been killed. It generated revenue by re-selling wheat, barley, and other stolen agricultural items. Other sources of funding included local revenues such as the *jizya*, an Islamic tax levied on non-Muslims as a kind of protection fee, and steadily rising duties on electricity and water. ISIS also confiscated 20 to 50 per cent of the salaries of Iraqi government employees, which were still being paid by the central government. As of late 2014, ISIS had seized one-third of the most important archaeological sites and historical places in Iraq. It is believed that it has sold \$100 million worth of antiquities (Hartmann 2015; Loveluck 2015). In Mosul, surgeons were hired to extract and sell the organs from fallen fighters, injured persons, abandoned people, and individuals who had been kidnapped (Nassir al-Hassoun 2014). ISIS also made a profit by establishing a trafficking network in Raqqa that has sold approximately 5,000 Yazidi women and children into slavery.

### 3.3 Building the "Islamic State"

By the summer of 2014, ISIS ruled a territory similar in size to Great Britain with an estimated population of nine million people. This success story enabled the group to create an aura of invincibility and an image of a steadily expanding Islamic empire. During this euphoric period, on 29 June 2014, ISIS spokesperson Abu Muhammad al-Adnani announced Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi as the new caliph. The announcement gave al-Baghdadi the opportunity to claim exclusive political and religious authority over all Muslims worldwide and over competing Islamic groups, especially its main rival, al-Qaeda (Rosiny 2015). Simultaneously, Adnani declared the formation of the Islamic State (IS), dropping the previous territorial specification and thereby declaring the colonial borders between Syria and Iraq null and void. The new name expressed the claim that this entity was a stepping stone for further conquests that would result in a permanently expanding, universal Islamic empire.

The Islamic State established or occupied institutions similar to those of a modern state, such as ministries, military and police forces, and a secret service. Its wealth allowed IS to finance the newly created state's infrastructure, purchase the loyalty of local tribes, reward its fighters, and attract new recruits. It distributed services and food; passed (draconian Islamist) court verdicts; maintained schools; and provided customer protection and social services, information offices, and a radio station. Additionally, the Islamic State introduced symbols of modern statehood such as its black flag, identification papers, and an anthem (Marshall 2014), and it even planned to introduce its own gold currency (The Islamic State 1435b). As an initiation ritual, members publicly burned their passports and thus abandoned their former nationalities (*The Guardian* 2014).

Due to its strong religious and moral assertion that it would defend the deprived Sunni Muslim community, IS profited during its rise from a moral economy that relied on private donors and voluntary foreign fighters, some of whom even brought their own funds with

them. Now it was financially independent and could offer promising salaries to its fighters, whose incomes were much higher than those of local rebel fighters or the soldiers of the Syrian and Iraqi armies (Laub and Masters 2015). It supported its fighters' families and delivered services to the general population. Such support included honeymoon and baby bonuses, as well as payments for the poor and the widowed.

In his first public speech, the Friday sermon of 4 July 2014 at the Grand Mosque of Mosul, "Caliph" Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi declared that all Muslims worldwide had a religious duty to leave the "abode of unbelief" (*dar al-kufr*) and to migrate to the abode of Islam, the Islamic State (Bunzel 2015). This supposed obligation of Muslims to perform the *hijra* (emigration), in combination with the promise of an ever-expanding caliphate and alluring spoils of war, ensured a steady flow of new recruits from all over the world. In his audio message of 1 July 2014, Caliph Abu Bakr appealed to their emotions:

O Muslims in all places, rejoice, take heart, and hold your heads high! For today you have, by God's bounty, a state and caliphate that will renew your dignity and strength, that will recover your rights and your sovereignty: a state joining in brotherhood non-Arab and Arab, white and black, easterner and westerner [...]. God has brought their hearts together, and they have become, by God's grace, brothers loving together in God, standing in one trench, defending one another [...]. Their blood has mixed under one banner and for one purpose [...]. O Muslims, come to your state. Yes, your state! Come! Syria is not for Syrians, and Iraq is not for Iraqis. (Baghdadi 2014; Bunzel 2015: 41 f)

Such promises attracted many disenfranchised youths from Western countries who preferred to leave behind their lives, which they saw as void of stable roots of identity or hope for a better future. The IS rhetoric provided these youths – who had often faced ethnic discrimination and unemployment and lived in a consumer world that only the affluent can enjoy – with a vision of opportunity, mobility within the ranks, stardom, and the chance to be the vanguard of the Islamic State. It promised them a better life through the spoils of war, upwardly mobile career opportunities in the state administration, and celebrity in fighting – with the climax of becoming a "martyr" and thereby directly entering paradise. This narrative offered these young Muslims, so often the victims at home, the opportunity to participate in an apocalyptic battle, "the grand battle prior to the Hour" (*al-malhama al-kubra*) between the true believers and the infidels. They were promised a victorious end, as propagated by IS's online magazine *Dabiq* (The Islamic State 1435a: 6).

This image of invincibility has been reinforced and spread through the competent application of modern social media. IS propaganda connects an imagined, folkloristic early Islamic life in an egalitarian community of sword-wielding heroes on horseback to images of repeatedly successful military attacks undertaken with advanced US-made weaponry. It combines archaic visions of a religious order entailing an apparently clear division between good and evil, a strict regime of duties and obligations, and rigid gender roles with multi-ethnic com-

radeship, masculine heroism, and the real-life enactment of brutal videogames. The advanced PR team essentially produces high-quality media for a jihadist pop culture. Its products show, among other things, ambushes of regime troops, the brutal killings of hostages, and terrorist attacks, thereby disseminating threats and intimidation (Saltman and Winter 2014: 38). The Internet allows for the near-instantaneous transmission of IS propaganda in different languages around the world and strengthens the fictitious imagery of an expanding Islamic State. For example, the easily accessible online magazine *Dabiq* addresses foreign recruits from Europe and other world regions. It extensively discusses and glorifies isolated attacks by lone wolves, profiles new groups that have pledged their loyalty to Caliph Abu Bakr by oath (*bai`a*), and highlights new provinces (*wilayat*) that have joined the Islamic State.

### 3.4 *The Changing Use of Violence*

In this second stage of its cycle of violence, IS applied and exhibited brutal violence to intimidate its enemies and conquer new territories. The spoils of war generated state income and attracted new fighters to become part of the apparently self-fulfilling prophecy of an ever-expanding caliphate. Furthermore, the Islamic State utilised extreme violence to enforce its rigid understanding of Islamic behaviour and to subjugate rebellion. It used violence to "purify" its territory from undesirable behaviour and people it deemed un-Islamic. It chose ethnic-sectarian minorities as a soft target to demonstrate its "cleansing" of anyone considered an infidel from its Islamic empire. For example, the Yazidis suffered, and continue to suffer, immensely under IS, which denounces them as "devil worshippers." IS massacred scores of their men, enslaved their women and children, and stole their property (Human Rights Council 2016). In the case of Christians, many were given the choice of either converting to Islam or fleeing the Islamic State territory, in which case they were forced to leave their property behind.

Protestors, activists, and the members of rival militias were subject to harsh punishments. Hundreds of members of rebellious tribes such as the Shaitat in Syria and the Al Bu Nimr in Iraq were massacred in revenge for their disobedience (Guerin 2014; Sly 2014). IS detained and punished people suspected of breaking Islamic sharia rules; of committing ordinary crimes such as theft, embezzlement, and murder; or of committing religiously prohibited acts, which include certain sexual practices and the selling and consumption of drugs. IS inflicted heavy corporal punishment and death sentences, often publicly executing "criminals" after noon prayers in order to demonstrate the repercussions of resisting its rule (Amnesty International 2013). Violence was even used to punish constituents without a trial. For example, citizens could be reprimanded for not complying with the strict dress code or for missing prayers (Aarja 2013). During Ramadan in July 2015, the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights (SOHR) reported that IS tortured, publicly crucified, and flogged approximately 94 Muslims who broke their fast. Five of the victims were minors (Dearden 2015; *ARA News* 2015). IS's violence in this stage was all encompassing and merciless.

### *3.5 Violence Evokes Resistance*

The Islamic State is not a nation state in the modern sense – that is, with a defined territory and borders separating it from its neighbours – as it denounces the concept of human-made frontiers. This is evident in its constant threats towards states such as Iraq, Syria, Jordan, Lebanon, and Saudi Arabia, as well as its attempt to exterminate entire ethnic and religious communities such as the Yazidis, Christians, Kurds, and Shiites residing in or adjoining its territory. The scope of atrocities IS has committed has provoked massive resistance. Its excessive use of violence is now haunting the Islamic State, as it has entered into a permanent state of war with its neighbours and their allies, which include Iran, the United States, other Western countries, some Arab countries, and Russia. Having proclaimed statehood and now operating in the open, not from the underground, IS has become vulnerable to outside attacks on its own territory.

With help from Iran, the Shia militias of the Popular Mobilization Forces were the first to succeed in repelling IS from its advance on Baghdad, and they subsequently ousted it from both Shia- and Sunni-dominated areas. Since summer 2014 the Iraqi government and the Kurdish regional government have received support from Iran and Western states. On 8 August, US fighter jets started bombing IS targets. Since September 2014 a coalition of more than 60 states including the USA, the European Union, and the Arab League has formed to combat the Islamic State. A five-part plan to counter IS includes providing military support to coalition partners, preventing the flow of foreign fighters, cutting access to funding sources, addressing the humanitarian crises within the region, and countering IS's public narrative (Allen 2014).

However, conflicting national interests have prevented the coherent containment of IS (Lang, Juul, and Awad 2015: 6). Important protagonists such as Iran, Russia, and the Syrian regime, as well as non-state actors such as the Syrian Kurdish PYD militia and Shia militias are not members of the anti-IS alliance, although some of them have been more strongly committed in their struggle than most of the Arab Sunni regimes. Turkey has long left its borders open for jihadist foreign fighters to enter and leave the Islamic State. Saudi Arabia and other Gulf monarchies have contributed virtually nothing to the air campaign, instead fighting against a Houthi-led rebellion in Yemen. This war and the corresponding state disintegration have created new opportunities for al-Qaeda and IS to expand there. Nevertheless, the active members of the Global Coalition to Counter IS have succeeded in halting and even repelling the IS advance in Iraq and in Syria.

## **4 Third Stage: Brutalisation as a Survival Strategy**

The IS's atrocities, as well as its challenging of other states and its attempts to exterminate entire communities, have provoked massive resistance from state and non-state actors. The

long war of attrition from September 2014 until February 2015 between IS and Kurdish militias in the Kurdish enclave Kobane ended with the defeat of IS, with the help of US airstrikes, and marked a decisive turning point (Lund 2015: 3). While temporary IS territorial gains, such as the conquest of Ramadi in Iraq and of Palmyra in Syria in May 2015, came to pass due to weakness on the part of the Iraqi and Syrian armies, both armies have since regained momentum due to US support for the Iraqi army and Russian support for the Syrian army. In summer 2015, the expansion of the Islamic State came to a halt, and IS even lost important areas of its territory (Strack 2015).

#### *4.1 A Downward Spiral of Defeat*

Instead of the self-fulfilling prophecy of a permanently expanding Islamic empire, the loss of territory, income, and credibility has now plunged IS into a downward spiral. IS has failed to achieve its goal of absorbing neighbouring states such as Saudi Arabia, Jordan, Lebanon, and Israel/Palestine, as it proclaimed it would do in the summer of 2014. Any military defeat and retreat from occupied territory will further undermine its promise of a permanently expanding caliphate and its self-styled image of being the chosen victors.

Once-supportive factors are now turning against the Islamic State. The multi-ethnicity that once brought together a global community with a shared fervour for the Syrian-Iraqi jihad is now fuelling competition, jealousy and intra-group rivalries (Souleimanov 2014). The confusion of multiple languages also represents a disadvantage on the battlefield. The European members, accused of being privileged with more comfortable houses, are said to complain about boring jobs and being used up for suicide missions. They accuse the locals of being ungrateful for their sacrifices, while the locals feel alienated by the arrogant foreigners.

Worldwide media attention has ebbed given the mere repetition of barbaric brutality, and meanwhile there are more defeats than successes to report on. The group's opponents have developed more effective technical means of countering suicide attacks, and groups once terrified by the invincible appearance of IS are now starting to take revenge. Moreover, hundreds of thousands of refugees have set out for central Europe, many of them fleeing the Islamic State, whose population has dropped to six million. Ironically, they are turning towards countries deemed "abodes of unbelief" by the radical Salafist movement. This is a major PR disaster for IS, which to save face has slandered the refugees as having abandoned their religion, thereby committing apostasy (Zelin 2015).

In addition, the reversal of the military expansion has caused serious financial difficulties for IS. Its income sources have dried up due to the lack of new territorial facilities as well as public and private property to loot. The combination of the dramatic drop in oil prices on the world market and the allied bombings of IS-held oil installations has drastically decreased its assets. The destruction of the IS treasury in Mosul in January 2016 only furthered its monetary plunge. Because the Iraqi government stopped remitting salaries to government em-

ployees within the Islamic State territory in September 2015, IS can no longer extract between 20 and 50 per cent of these salaries as it did before (Hinnant, Karam, and George 2016).

The loss of these significant income sources may ultimately undermine the group's legitimacy, shifting it from a protector to a predator. Since December 2015, Raqqa has felt the grip of IS's monetary restrictions: salaries have been halved and electricity rationed, and prices for basic necessities are spiralling out of reach (Hinnant, Karam, and George 2016). Analogous to the drop in revenues, IS is suffering from brain drain – for instance, in the field of qualified medical staff – and is now threatening experts that their property will be confiscated if they flee its domain (Al-Tamimi 2015).

In light of the caliphate's recent decline, the attractiveness of joining it has dropped significantly. Reports of deserters being captured and executed have emerged repeatedly since the end of 2014 (Freytas-Tamura 2015; al-Huwaydi 2014; Moore 2016; Solomon 2014). There are also shocking death-toll estimates, which claim that roughly 1,000 fighters die in battle each month. The killings of several IS leaders since 2015 – by air strikes, drone attacks, or in battle – have also aided in reversing the fate of the previously untouchable caliphate. These events have helped shape a more realistic and unattractive image of the Islamic State, curbing new fighters' desire to join.

#### *4.2 The Further Brutalisation of Violence*

These military backlashes and motivational setbacks have caused a strategic shift in IS's use of violence. It has steadily increased its brutality in order to fulfil its need to control its dominion, annihilate "disbelief," and enforce obedience. The strategic introduction of new forms of gruesome behaviour has served as a technique to deter its enemies and demand obedience from its own recruits. The group's brutal killings through the shooting, crucifixion, and the beheading of prisoners have lost their usefulness in deterring undesired behaviour due to their decreased shock value. As a consequence, IS has upped its brutality to re-establish the shock effect necessary to successfully deter its opponents. Execution videos and photographs now show killings that take the form of elaborate crucifixions, stoning, immolation, live burials, and death through multiple amputations. In June 2015, IS released a particularly gruesome video depicting its fighters committing heinous atrocities. They included the incineration, drowning, and blowing up of men who were still alive (Hubbard 2015; Siegel 2015: 14).

This violence has also turned inwards. Inhabitants of Mosul reported in January 2016 that IS leaders had rounded up fighters who had escaped from the lost battle of Ramadi in a public square and set them alight for not fighting to their death (McKay 2016). IS has also become increasingly paranoid about spies, hypocrites, and traitors. Thus, a climate of suspicion and mistrust has erupted within its ranks. Through its newfound brutality, the organisation wants to send an internal message that cheaters and spies will be punished without remorse. The penalties are also meant to deter foreign fighters from escaping and reporting on the true disaster inside the Islamic State.

A further indication of how coldly IS calculates the shock effect of its actions is the fact that it openly employs children as soldiers, executioners, and even suicide bombers (Miller 2016). For instance, in January 2015 two children executed two former jihadists, presumably for espionage. Other examples include a video of a 10-year-old boy beheading a Syrian hostage. Another video shows several boys committing mass executions in the ancient city of Palmyra. IS justifies and glorifies this use of child soldiers, whom it calls "lion cubs" (*ashbal*): "These are the children of the Ummah of jihād [...]. The Islamic State has taken it upon itself to fulfil the Ummah's duty towards this generation in preparing it to face the crusaders and their allies in defence of Islam" (The Islamic State 1436b).

Violence is also applied to destroy sacred places and ancient sites. In its summer campaign of 2014, IS had already begun demolishing the ancient holy sites of religious communities it deemed idolatrous (Mamouri 2014). In March 2015 it started destroying archaeological sites in the towns of Nimrud and Hatra in Iraq, artefacts at the Mosul Museum, and the Nergal Gate in the Assyrian city of Nineveh (Hartmann 2015). While the proclaimed purpose of destroying antiquities is to rid the world of idols that serve "a nationalist agenda" and "to enrage the kuffār [infidels], a deed that in itself is beloved to Allah" (The Islamic State 1436a: 22), the iconoclasm clearly had an additional, strategic relevance as it happened shortly after the group's disastrous defeat in Kobane. With the ostentatious destruction of cultural world heritage, IS intended to catch the attention of Western media and flaunt its capacity to hit and hurt anytime, thereby compensating for its humiliating losses against the Kurdish militia in Kobane.

When it conquered the ancient ruins of Palmyra in Syria in May 2015, IS used the amphitheatre as a macabre arena for public executions. It then laced several shrines and temples with explosives, but instead of destroying them straightaway, it preserved them as a pawn for subsequent displays of power. It was after the loss of territory in northern Syria that IS deemed it necessary to demonstrate its potential for action by blowing up the Arch of Triumph on 4 October 2015 (Shaheen 2015). Much of this ferocity was addressed to a Western public. The escalation of shocking images ensured the attention of the world media. This attention is necessary if the IS is to maintain its claim to be the jihadist camp's vanguard and to safeguard its image of a winning team still capable of further victories.

As a side effect, IS's performance and display of extreme violence on the Internet and in the global media also serves to entrap many of its foreign fighters, as it turns them into assassins who risk punishment if they return to their home countries. Proudly posing with heavy weaponry and presenting criminal acts such as the beheading of prisoners on the Internet has put many of them on international wanted lists. The leaking of 22,000 names of IS foreign fighters at the beginning of 2016 could have a similar effect, as defectors will not be able to deny their participation in criminal violence. Fighting for IS has thus in many cases become a dead end with no option for exit other than victory or martyrdom.

### 4.3 A Fictitious Expansion

Following the 29 June 2014 proclamation of the caliphate, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi invited jihadi groups from around the world to pledge allegiance to him as the head of all Muslims. On 13 November 2014, he released an audio recording in which he announced the expansion of IS into Algeria, Egypt, Libya, Saudi Arabia, and Yemen (Bunzel 2015: 42). As of December 2015, 34 pre-existing groups from countries including Afghanistan, India, Indonesia, Lebanon, Mali, Nigeria, Pakistan, the Philippines, Saudi Arabia, Tunisia, and Yemen had followed his call.<sup>4</sup> While IS boastfully proclaimed the operational areas of these Islamist militias as new provinces (*wilayat*), most of them had no real territorial autonomy, let alone infrastructure, that would connect them to Islamic State territory. Their seizure served simply as a means to propagate the fictitious claim of a supposedly expanding Islamic State.

In addition to its brutalisation strategy and its attempt to expand by incorporating other jihadist militias worldwide, IS has also used de-territorialisation and the globalisation of jihad as strategies to conceal its demise as a territorial state. Lone-wolf attacks are one element of a new strategy intended to suggest the permanent expansion of the Islamic State. In an audio-tape released on 13 November 2014, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi demanded, "O soldiers of the Islamic State [...] erupt volcanoes of jihad everywhere" (Bunzel 2015: 42). In a similar recording from 14 May 2015, he again called upon everyone unable to emigrate to "fight in his land wherever that may be" (Lucas 2015). Other videos feature foreign fighters speaking in their native language while promoting lone-wolf operations to ensure the killing of Western "crusaders" (Shiloach 2015). Several attacks carried out over the last two years illustrate this global jihad.

Over time, IS has professionalised its attacks abroad. The year 2015 offers many examples, including the attack on the National Museum in Tunis on 18 March, in a mosque in Sana'a on 20 March, on a Shiite mosque in al-Qudayh, Saudi Arabia, on 20 May, and in Dammam, Saudi Arabia, one week later. Closely linked to the one-year anniversary of the proclamation of the caliphate, and seemingly well aware of the additional alertness of the world media, IS started a coordinated campaign of attacks on 26 June. A suicide bomber killed 27 people in the Shiite Imam Sadiq Mosque in Kuwait (Al Jazeera 2015), and a lone-wolf assassin killed 37 Western tourists in Sousse, Tunisia, on the same day. The bloody climax of this Ramadan campaign occurred on 18 July, when a suicide bomber detonated a bomb in a busy market in Khan Bani Saad in Iraq, killing 115, including many children. Numerous other bomb attacks followed in Turkey, Lebanon, Egypt, Saudi Arabia, and Yemen, with a special focus on Afghanistan, Pakistan, and Iraq.

The coordinated attack in Paris on 13 November 2015, in which several suicide bombers and assassins killed 130 and injured more than 350, turned out to be a game changer for IS.

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4 For a list of jihadi groups that pledged allegiance to ISIS between August 2014 and May 2015 see Intel Center (2015). For an update from December 2015 see UNSC (2016).



On the one hand, the attack had added shock value because it hit the centre of a European capital with massive and coordinated assaults. Furthermore, it appears to have been intended to alienate Muslim and non-Muslim segments of Western societies by inciting hatred against Muslim co-citizens and refugees arriving from the Middle East war zones. IS may have hoped that this sentiment would eventually cause the members of the Muslim population to leave for the Islamic State.

On the other hand, the Paris attack aggravated the pressure on the Islamic State, as France and other actors expanded their military campaigns against the group. The pressure continued at the global level, with the UN Security Council for the first time unanimously adopting a resolution (2254) on a road map for a peace process in Syria. The resolution emphasises "the negative impact of terrorism and violent extremist ideology in support of terrorism, the destabilizing effect of the crisis on the region and beyond, including the resulting increase in terrorists drawn to the fighting in Syria" (UNSC 2015).

Despite further terrorist attacks in Brussels on 22 March 2016, IS's expansion of brutal force has had no strategic value for the existing Islamic State. Rather, it has been an attempt to compensate for real territorial losses that negatively impact the group's self-portrayal as an expanding caliphate by ensuring worldwide attention and creating distractions from the real problems it faces within its territory. IS's current path of brutalisation and fictitious expansion may even accelerate its decline by generating further local, regional, and international resistance. With the loss of territorial statehood, the caliph loses his source of legitimacy as the political and religious head of a state. The former dynamic of the self-fulfilling prophecy of the victorious caliphate then becomes the downfall of the "wrong caliph" as a pretender (Rosiny 2015).

## 5 No Future for the Islamic State

As shown above, IS's behaviour can be characterised as following a cycle of violence consisting of three stages. Brute force has been at the core of all three stages, yet the types of violence used and their strategic impact have varied.

- 1) In a first stage, from roughly 2003 until 2010, the Iraqi al-Qaeda branch perpetrated terrorist attacks from the underground against the US-led occupation forces, the Iraqi state authorities, and the Shia community. The main intention of the violence at that time was to run a terrorist campaign against the Shiites that would provoke violent revenge attacks against the Sunni community, thereby mobilising a broad, violent Sunni uprising. Yet, AQI failed to instigate a popular rebellion and was even suppressed by other Sunni forces.
- 2) In a second stage, which started in 2010 and intensified in 2013, ISIS undertook a state-building project. Using brutal violence, it succeeded in conquering and controlling a vast territory and proclaimed an Islamic State and a caliphate in 2014. A salvation narrative of

an ever-expanding Islamic empire attracted many foreign fighters and members of rival jihadist militias, enabling the group to further expand and to create a self-fulfilling prophecy by mobilising ever more holy warriors. The group's development from conducting underground insurgent activity to openly controlling whole cities and provinces provided IS with the distinct opportunity to split from conventional terrorist groups and portray itself as a state-building force. However, the group remained an intrinsically violent entity, as its very existence depended on permanent conquest. The latter enabled it to fulfil its eschatological mission and meet its economic requirements, which were supported by looting.

- 3) IS's militant expansionism and its use of gruesome violence caused outrage and resistance among the attacked and their allies. A broad international spectrum of actors stopped and reversed the conquest. Therefore, in its third stage, which began in 2015, IS is now trying to compensate for its failed enlargement with a strategy of brutalisation and by expanding its operating range with terrorist attacks. It is thereby proclaiming a fictitious expansion to compensate for failed conquests of new territory and to mask its real territorial decline. It intends to strike fear into the hearts of its opponents and those among its own fighters who might be considering abandoning the Islamic State.

IS's looming demise poses new threats, as it is now attempting to pursue its narrative of fulfilling a divine mission by opening up new front lines, inventing new atrocities in its videos, and perpetrating spectacular terrorist attacks worldwide. In doing so, it may delay but not reverse the demise of the Islamic State as a territorial unit. Most likely it will end up where it started, as an underground terrorist militia without territory and legitimacy, but with a legacy of unprecedented brutality.

IS has distinguished itself from other terrorist groups through its conquest of territory and its state-building process. At the same time, it has differed from liberation movements because it has not gained (or even attempted to gain) recognition and legitimacy from any major outside actor. IS has also failed to initiate a sustainable state-building process, instead building up a bandit state based on brute force and surprise forays into adjacent territories. Furthermore, it does not justify the use of violence as a means to a political end, as terrorist or liberation movements do; rather, it holds violence sacred and legitimises its practice as a religious obligation. This, together with its binary codes of salvation and doom, its promise to fulfil a divine mission, and its radical zeal for breaking with the past for the sake of a millenarian new order, makes IS an apocalyptic organisation undertaking antinomian acts of violence that transgress Islamic legal rules (Kaplan and Costa 2015). As the demise of the Islamic State in Syria and Iraq and the related disempowerment of the caliphate is just a matter of time, the sect may survive in some hazardous pockets and derivations as a bestial terrorist underground movement that continues to massacre civilians. However, there is no future for an Islamic State without territory, and there is no authority for Caliph Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi without an Islamic State.

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WP Coordinator: Melissa Nelson