

The Origins of the Islamic State

Matthieu REY

Is the Islamic State a state, as it claims to be? Or does it designate a new form of imperial sovereignty? Matthieu Rey traces the history of the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria, starting with European colonial rule and the two Gulf wars.

As a new actor on the Middle Eastern scene, the Islamic State (IS) has been the focus of all attention ever since its official appearance on June 29th, 2014. This owes mainly to the group's modus operandi (the beheading of Westerners dressed as Guantanamo prisoners), its rhetoric marked by equally extreme violence, its sudden challenging of state partitions established since the 1916 Cambon-Grey agreement (also known as Sykes-Picot),¹ and its confrontation of the new Western coalition that launched a bombing campaign in Iraq in September 2014. The media have rapidly presented IS – most often in the mode of terror – as the new protagonist that is to globally redefine the local, and even regional, political order. The group's dramatic advance, massive conquest, and disruption of the Middle East map constitute different entry points for analysing what is, in political terms, a relatively exceptional phenomenon. We do not propose here to reconsider the relevance of this assessment; nor do we wish to estimate the lasting or ephemeral character of this actor, or the reality of its access to material, human and symbolic resources that might bring about the great upheaval foretold. Rather, we seek to interrogate the meaning of its name, and to understand how a series of disruptions in Iraq and Syria generated this form of public authority.

The emergence of *al-dawla al-islāmiyya fī-l-`irāq*, followed by the choice of the names *al-dawla al-islāmiyya fī-l-`irāq wa-l-shām* and recently *al-dawla al-islāmiyya*, nominally refer to a semantic field that renders the group's self-definition as a state (*dawla*) possible. The creation of this group has been linked to the redrawing of the borders or contours of state power that followed the Arab revolutions. The claim that it constitutes a state is precisely what this article purports to examine. What does *dawla* signify? Does it take on a specific meaning in the case of IS, or can this new actor be understood as a one of the state versions specific to either the Arab world, the Muslim world or, more broadly, the global South? The state has been apprehended primarily with reference to Western models²; yet, its translation into territories of the global South must be reconsidered in light of other historical legacies. Grasping the specific features of this new actor requires us to examine the monopoly it claims on territorial sovereignty. To what

¹ In the aftermath of WWI, the British and French foreign affairs ministers, Paul Cambon and Edward Grey, signed an agreement partitioning the Ottoman territory based on discussions and negotiations between their representatives Mark Sykes and Georges Picot.

² See Bertrand Badie and Pierre Birnbaum, *Sociologie de l'État*, Paris, Hachette, 1983.

extent can sociogenesis account for the various elements that have interacted in the formation and development of this entity?

In order to understand this new phenomenon and its political inscription in a territory, we start from three hypotheses. First, this form of militancy must be considered in relation to the contemporary history of protest movements born out of the recomposition of the Middle East scene following the 2003 war in Iraq. This date marks the convergence of several contemporary developments: the challenging of the nationalist ideal embodied by the nation-state, the acceleration of socio-economic change in a context characterised by the imposition of neoliberal policies on the one hand and foreign domination on the other, and the development of new uses of violence as forms of political demand. Second, changes in the spatiality of power have led to the revenge of peripheral territories against a dominant and domineering centre. Lastly, the different segments of the local population have acquired new repertoires of action in the insurgency that began in 2011. IS is a complex product that must be analysed in light of these parameters.

The Time of the Iraqi and Syrian Revolts: Socio-Spatial Similarities

Iraq and Syria have often been compared in historical and political studies – because of the complex ethno-religious mosaic that characterises them both, their common Ottoman and then mandatory heritage, their partitioning by European powers after the First World War, and their experience of Baathist regimes from the 1970s onwards.³ We do not engage here in a comparative examination of these two states. Rather, we seek to understand how a certain mode of governance triggered economic, social and cultural disruptions that allowed for the emergence of IS as a new Middle Eastern actor.

A brief review of the two countries' common Baathist experience reveals how law-based forms of governance broke down and made way for a web of interpersonal relationships that culminated in the leader's authority. In the Baathist system, the dictator arbitrates between enforcement bodies, intelligence services, sections of the army and armed wings of the party, all of which have full control over civilian populations. The latter are integrated into surveillance apparatuses – i.e., they must regularly provide information – and are rewarded in the form of multiple symbolic or material benefits depending on their personal relationship with the enforcement agent.⁴ The mechanisms at work in the two countries precipitated the crisis of pre-existing forms of social and political organisation – be they duly controlled political parties, associations, or labour unions. The authorities also triggered, on a different scale, the disruption of tribal solidarities by promoting low-level figures in the tribe hierarchy and by altering both intra-tribal power games and competition within groups. Between the late 1970s and early 1990s, the two political systems institutionalised political instability so as to abolish all forms of political and social groupings that might contend with them. Yet they did so without seeking to substitute another model – a feature that differentiates these regimes from totalitarian systems.

³ Baath party officers seized power in 1963, temporarily in Iraq and definitely in Syria. The experience became permanent in 1970 and was legitimised by the party's Arabist doctrine.

⁴ Joseph Sassoon, *Saddam Hussein's Ba'ath Party: Inside an Authoritarian Regime*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2012.

The trajectories of Syria and Iraq diverged during the years 1990-2000. In Iraq, the long conflict with Iran (1980-1988) did not allow Saddam Hussein's regime to ground its authority in the prestige of victory. On the contrary, the conflict exhausted financial reserves, exacerbated the authorities' reading of Iraqi society along religious lines, and favoured an exclusively repressive handling of internal contestation. In 1991, following the defeat - a crushing one this time - that marked the end of the Kuwait invasion, the Iraqi regime transformed its mode of population management in several ways. First, it morphed into a distinctly Sunni power, and it is remembered today for its major crackdown on insurgent Kurdish and Shiite populations in the aftermath of defeat.⁵ Second, the regime spread its hold on society through new mechanisms: support for tribes that pledged allegiance to it, and management of an economic sphere which it now fully controlled due to the imposition of the blockade. Finally, the spheres of Iraqi sovereignty were redefined as a result of flight bans, thus rendering concrete the abolition of the state as unique actor of governance. This, however, does not mean that the Iraqi regime was unable to act in areas that were no longer under its control; for it could still mediate between local factions so as to restore, from a distance, its role of supervision. Thus, when Kurdish forces found themselves divided in 1996, central troops responded to the call of one of the actors involved. This transformation of the Iraqi system did not favour the re-emergence of a political or public sphere, but the partial institutionalisation of social and political control in the exclusive service of the dictator. Some sectors of economic or social activity were no longer integrated into institutional networks and hence became autonomous, to the extent that even militia groups enjoyed royal prerogatives. The majority of the population was then obligated to consent to work with these new bodies – be they tribal or close to the party – if they wished to have access to resources limited by the blockade. It is in this context that the 2003 American invasion intervened, causing the decision centre to collapse after just a few weeks of fighting.

In Syria, the 1990s were not marked by a major reconfiguration of the mode of governance, but, on the contrary, by the decline and demise of Assad's power. The dictator demanded of his citizens that they obey on the basis of tacit consent, not the explicit acceptance of its values as such.⁶ Those segments of society that consented to recognise the authority of the state were granted some form of autonomy in return. This is, in fact, how the *ulemas* were allowed to organise.⁷ The situation changed at the turn of the 2000s with the passing of the "eternal president" (*al-ra'īs al-khālid*), who was succeeded by his young son Bashar al-Assad. The balance of power was shaped by three major dynamics, which formed the background of the 2011 revolt. First, the authoritarian and largely personalised mode of governance was left

⁵ Fanar Haddad, *Sectarianism in Iraq: Antagonistic Visions of Unity*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2011; Dina Khoury, *Iraq in Wartime: Soldiering, Martyrdom, and Remembrance*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2013.

⁶ Lisa Weeden, *Ambiguities of Domination: Politics, Rhetoric, and Symbols in Contemporary Syria*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1999.

⁷ Ulemas are scholars of Islam: They are consulted on numerous matters pertaining to religious practice and its impact on daily life. See Thomas Pierret, *Baas et Islam en Syrie. La dynastie des Assad face aux oulémas*, Paris, Puf, 2011.

unchallenged. The ephemeral 2000 Damascus Spring⁸ had faded rapidly, to the extent that most young Syrians failed to remember this event, or else analysed it as an elitist moment.⁹

Second, while the mode of governance remained uncontested, the structure of the system evolved in the direction of greater personalisation of the regime. In order to assert his authority, the young president had to separate himself from the caciques of the regime, and hence to dissolve the collegial body that surrounded the supreme arbiter in the days of Hafez al-Assad. He challenged a certain polyarchy in favour of new men without local roots. The political and spatial centralisation of power was thus implemented.

Lastly, from 2003 onwards, the regime underwent a series of intense international perturbations – i.e., the American invasion of Iraq followed by the Syrian army's forced withdrawal from Lebanon in 2005, which together led the Assad regime to reconfigure its mode of operation, mainly by redeploying the extraction of resources in the Syrian territories. For instance, the modification of agrarian laws led to the transfer of land parcels in the Hauran province in southern Syria, under the control of Rami Makhlouf.¹⁰ Subtly, geopolitical transformations gave rise to a set of informal relations that came to structure acquaintance networks. The city of Homs became the outlet for Iraqi trade during the embargo and the invasion; a cross-border passage was opened for fighters and goods in the Euphrates region; etc.¹¹ Thus, when the insurgency broke out in 2011, the Syrian territories were organised into a network of formal and informal activities whose relative autonomy resulted from the absence of any common public space.

In a way, the American invasion and Syrian uprising were apocalyptic moments for the societies and states of Iraq and Syria. They revealed the silent transformations at work under authoritarian regimes, as well as the fault lines into which public authorities stumbled. Before engaging a reflection on the new public actor that has grafted itself onto this local reality, we must specify the state and territorialisation of social ties that prevailed at the time. The breakdown of political and associative ties¹² destroyed all avenues for national expression. In the case of Iraq, this situation evolved under the embargo regime and later the US administration, with individuals withdrawing into social units that had the capacity to protect them. A process of tribalisation occurred that partitioned space into more or less autonomous social and territorial

⁸ Following Hafez al-Assad's death, several groups of Syrian intellectuals (hailing mostly from Damascus) began organising salons and hosting conferences, and tried to open up a debate on the political transition out of authoritarianism. The experience was rapidly cut short.

⁹ Matthieu Rey, "2003, a new generation in Syria," *Generations and Protests*, edited by Ratiba Hadj-Moussa and Marc Ayyash, forthcoming.

¹⁰ Rami Makhlouf is a cousin of Bashar al-Assad and one of Syria's key businessmen. He owns two mobile phone companies and has shares in most Syrian companies. Thanks to his proximity with the Assad family, he was able to impose several business undertakings. Interview conducted with members of the High Tribal Council (*majlis al mashā'ir*) in Daraa, October 2014.

¹¹ Interview conducted with activists in Damascus, June 2012.

¹² The rebirth of the associative phenomenon in Syria in the 2000s nonetheless bears recalling. See Laura Ruiz de Elvira Carrascal, "L'État syrien de Bachar al-Assad à l'épreuve des ONG," *Maghreb-Machrek*, n° 203, Spring 2010, p. 41-57.

units.¹³ Urban neighbourhoods were restructured through exchange and the protection of their inhabitants. Similarly, rural and tribal areas witnessed the emergence of new forms of organisation. This dynamic, which had been driving the Iraqi civil war since 2006, had become widespread in Syria by the time the protest was militarised in 2012.¹⁴ The partitioning of Syrian territory into neighbourhoods and villages was due primarily to the repressive capabilities of the Syrian regime, which prevented the formation of a unified, dissenting national space. Before long, the mobilisation resources captured by family ties and local solidarities prevailed as the main organisational vehicle for armed groups and civilians that were denouncing the regime. Syria formed a vast puzzle wherein each local unit saw its actors define themselves based on the configuration of the surrounding area (the nearby village or neighbourhood, the new forces it accommodated, etc.) and mobilisations at the national level (mobilisation around coordination councils, or emergence of national forces).¹⁵ The Free Syrian Army became the national expression of an agglomeration of locally structured brigades.

Thus, the US invasion and the Syrian uprising together shattered, in just a few months, the illusion that there existed a state in either Iraq or Syria. Out of this breakdown was born the revenge of territories – i.e., of peripheral spaces and populations largely capable of administering themselves.

A New Entrant: From the Islamic State of Iraq to the Islamic State

In 2003, US forces were able to remove Saddam Hussein in a matter of months. Yet while the capture of Baghdad revealed the inherent weakness of the Baathist systems in terms of obedience and resilience before a constituted armed force, it did not mark the end of the American project of political restructuring. The new political game precipitated the insurrectional explosion and the emergence of multiple forms of violence.¹⁶ Iraq provided the entrepreneurs of political violence with a framework for renewed action. Furthermore, the level of destruction and loss of human lives accelerated the rotation of organisational models and field experiments, as high numbers of executives died in military operations. In this context, a new actor claiming affiliation to jihadist Salafism began to stand out in 2004, under the leadership of Abu Musab al-Zarqawi. We will not dwell here on the intellectual and militant trajectory of the agents of the Islamic State in Iraq (ISI).¹⁷ More simply, we will focus on their immediate choice of the term *dawla* (state) to designate the new structure, and on their quest for a specific territorial implantation. As soon as the group was born, it distinguished itself in the jihadist constellation by

¹³ Hamit Bozarslan and Hocham Dawod, *La société irakienne. Communautés, pouvoirs et violences*, Paris, Karthala, 2003, p. 40-43.

¹⁴ The term militarisation refers to the moment when the forces of the regime deployed and used heavy weaponry over the entire Syrian territory, which precipitated in turn the formation of the resistance and the liberation of territories. See Chaymaa Hassabo and Matthieu Rey “The immediate history facing the Egyptian and Syrian events,” MEHAT presentation (Chicago), May 2014.

¹⁵ Matthieu Rey, “La révolte des quartiers : territorialisation plutôt que professionnalisation,” in François Burgat and Bruno Paoli (eds.), *Pas de printemps pour la Syrie, les clés pour comprendre les acteurs et les défis de la crise (2011-2013)*, Paris, la Découverte, 2013, p. 86-87.

¹⁶ Édouard Metenier and Loulouwa al-Rachid, “A propos de la violence ‘irakienne’. Quelques éléments de réflexion sur un lieu commun,” *A Contrario*, 2008/1, n°5, p. 114-133.

¹⁷ See Michael Weiss and Hassan Hassan, *ISIS, Inside the Army of Terror*, New York, Regan Arts, 2015, p. 16 and following pages.

its pursuit of territorial anchoring. It seemed to shift from a logic of networks to one of occupying and administering a territory. Though this innovation was significant in relation to what previous Salafist groups had been able to accomplish, it was less so in the Iraqi context. Between 2005 and 2009, the new actor took its place in the emerging constellation of partisan and territorial entities. The religious factor naturally cannot be discarded; however, it does not fully explain the situation. Local anchoring responded at once to a new political project - establishing jihad in space – and to a recomposition of the Iraqi territory around new political actors who grounded their legitimacy in their ability to legally or illegally extract resources, and in their capacity to provide security.

The new institutions forged in 2005 and the mechanisms of elite selection significantly transformed the Iraqi state as the main agent of governance. The December 2005 legislative elections revealed the variable geometry of people's and places' integration into the state. Decried as a creation aimed at excluding Sunni elements, the Constitution led to voter abstention in large sectors of the population. In territorial terms, only 2% of the population participated in the elections of the al-Anbar governorate, which is where ISI first structured itself. The withdrawal of sovereign authority therefore occurred along with the emergence of new groups. One can hardly understand the ease with which power shifted from one to the other without referring to the multiple informal processes – i.e., smuggling, re-tribalisation, etc. - that unfolded in this western region of Iraq in the last decade. Sectarian cohesion accompanied the reuniting of populations and their affiliation to the new “state” in the making. This process largely echoed relatively similar phenomena in the Kurdish regions (emergence of an autonomous governorate established in a more or less bounded territory) and the Shiite ones. In the latter case, the territorialisation of political actors did not occur in the exact same manner – i.e., the withdrawal of a space from the national whole – but rather through the conquest of determined positions. Thus, in Iraq, one actor among many was formed during the violent civil confrontation of 2006-2008, and then implanted itself in one province.

The story of Iraq between 2004 and 2012 is beginning to be widely known. First, ISI expanded, obtaining the adhesion of foreign fighters drawn to the jihad as well as that of local tribal elements. The latter pledged allegiance to ISI, yet without this being formalised in a specific ritual. The intersection of these two categories of actors nevertheless facilitated the effective takeover. The strategic decision to fight foreigners (following a classic anti-imperialist rhetoric) and the Shiite presence (resuscitating medieval references when necessary), as well as the recourse to particularly violent forms of action, constituted the rallying platform for this movement.

Second, US forces led by David Petraeus recaptured positions held by ISI by severing ties of allegiance to it, and by building a territorial network of local control forces grouped together in the *Ḥaraka al-Şaḥwat al-sunniyya* (Sunni Awakening Movement).¹⁸ This initiative proved all the easier since animosities were developing between foreign members of the group and tribal factions surrounding the issue of matrimonial exchange. Indeed, ISI's attempt to implant itself in the population ran into the impossibility of marrying women of the tribes. Around 2009, what was viewed as a threat by Baghdad and Washington disappeared, and the American actor was

¹⁸ Interview with an American security officer, Washington DC, April 2014; Toby Dodge, *Iraq: From War to a New Authoritarianism*, London, Routledge, 2013.

able to construct a narrative of victory to justify its departure. The government of Nūrī al-Mālikī then suspended what it viewed as pointless financial rewards to local supporters, prompting the further withdrawal of state power from a vast territory. During the first years of its existence, ISI adopted two key strategies: the establishment of territorial control through the takeover of checkpoints, and the introduction of taxation. In 2009, however, the organisation's setbacks led to its temporary disappearance.

Between 2009 and 2013 – that is, between the organisation's first disappearance and its implantation in Syria – ISI was reconstructed around the leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, who played an emblematic role more than a directive one. In Iraq, the reappearance of ISI owed largely to the frustration that developed among Sunni populations towards the government of Nūrī al-Mālikī, and to the resumption of territorial conquests. The departure of US forces in 2012 led to political divisions and to the return of political violence. Following the analyses of Peter Harling,¹⁹ the emergence of this “providential enemy” – as Harling terms ISI – is due in large measure to the state's disinterest for a section of the population, and to the use of a religious register to tie a political base to the authorities. Nouri al-Maliki did not seek to territorialise the sovereignty of the Iraqi state over the entire national space, nor did he wish to share power and resources with all social groups. A new authoritarianism, the exclusive control of wealth, and the mobilisation of segments of the population along religious lines formed the new pillars of governance – a trend which the 2010 Erbil agreement failed to correct.²⁰ These dynamics strongly echoed transformations in Syria. We shall not retrace here every step of the Syrian revolution,²¹ but it bears noting that approaches for handling contestation and, more broadly, for managing populations in Iraq and Syria proved extremely similar. State authorities – or those who claimed to be controlling the state – constructed a discourse based on accusations against certain segments of the population so as to unite their own followers along religious lines. They did not hesitate to withdraw security forces from portions of the territory which they perceived as difficult to control. They denounced, on the external scene, internal enemies as terrorists so as to reap strategic rents (i.e., international support against these new threats).

Thus, in the summer of 2012, ISI returned as a key actor on the Iraqi scene. Meanwhile, eastern Syria, which ISI's Iraqi positions adjoined, opened up to the organisation with the rapid withdrawal of Damascus forces. Faced with the rise of armed conflict and the loss of several troops due to desertions and the liberation of territories, the Assad regime abandoned the space in which its intelligence and military forces operated to concentrate them along the Dara'a-Aleppo axis. Initially, ISI was content with sending a few representatives to Syria to investigate its possibilities of action. Yet the transformations that affected the local terrain precipitated the group's entrance onto the Syrian scene. Opposition forces had, indeed, been progressively fragmented along local lines, and in function of different political agendas. In light of these transformations, foreign partners were increasingly reluctant to support the protest. On April 9th, 2013, ISI's appearance on the Syrian stage was formalised with the adoption of a new name: the

¹⁹ Peter Harling, “État islamique, un monstre providentiel,” *Le Monde diplomatique*, September 2014.

²⁰ In 2011, Prime Minister Nouri Al-Maliki met with key representatives of the autonomous Government of Kurdistan. He managed to obstruct the initiatives of other Iraqi politicians who were calling for more decentralisation, which was the only way for them to block the hegemony of the Prime Minister.

²¹ Jean-Pierre Filiu, *Le Nouveau Moyen-Orient: Les peuples à l'heure de la révolution syrienne*, Paris, Fayard, 2013.

Islamic State of Iraq and Syria.²² The implantation and rapid expansion of the movement owed to the breakdown of other opposition forces (*liwa' al-tawhīd, ahrār al-shām*), which lost territorial control in favour of this new actor. The latter seemed to embody an alternative likely to win decisive victories.

ISIS has since continued to expand in both the Iraqi and Syrian territories, for different reasons and according to somewhat divergent logics. In Syria, the group's mode of affirmation has rested on its distinction from other elements of the opposition. In addition to being engaged in a latent conflict with *jahbat al-nusra*, an organisation that pledged allegiance to al-Qaeda in late 2012, the new Syrian actor has stopped privileging the overthrow of the regime and focused instead on the establishment of an Islamic order. It has managed to thrive over a large, sparsely populated area of Syria around the Euphrates. Nevertheless, when the group tried to extend its influence over Aleppo and its surroundings after the conquest of Raqqa (September 2013), it met with violent armed reaction from other opposition groups, which forced it to withdraw rapidly. Similarly, its incursions towards Al-Hasakah in northeast Syria were stopped by Kurdish roadblocks. It has therefore managed to remain the sole actor only in certain areas (mainly Raqqa and Deir al-Zur, even though it does not control this latter agglomeration), and this, by eliminating other elements of the opposition. It has also participated in the takeover of the regime's last military bases. By contrast, in Iraq, ISIS has made use of alliances between different dissenting forces of the post-2003 order, whose claims have intensified since the arrival of Nūrī al-Mālikī. Its widespread presence in both the administration and the police therefore predates the capture of cities, be they Fallujah (February 2014) or Mosul (June 2014).²³ In Iraq, the movement has forged ties with those who have been left out of the post-Saddam Hussein order, for the most part Baathist officers. Arrangements systems have allowed it to define a control zone, and sometimes to extend it temporarily.

In this context, the capture of Mosul marked the group's entry onto the regional scene. When ISIS forces stalled and then withdrew from the area of Tikrit, their leader proclaimed the establishment of a caliphate. Thanks to an intense communication campaign, this announcement overshadowed the latter setback and placed the region before a new actor: a state that claims to represent Islam.

The Control and Management of Territories

The importance for ISIS (IS since June 2014) of territories and their resources – mainly oil – has been highlighted in studies of the group's development. Has this importance been fading with the emergence of the state? How does this new actor organise the control and management of the public sphere? Several levels of analysis must be distinguished if one is to understand the nature and development of IS.

First, territorial control implies the elimination of all competing authorities. IS's first characteristic owes to the specific Iraqi-Syrian logic that developed following the US invasion and Syrian uprising: the construction of a territorial network around checkpoints, which function

²² The term *Shām* has been translated as Syria or Levant. The emergence of the group results mainly from the splitting of the group *jahbat al-nusra* into its different components.

²³ As Romain Caillet recalls in a television interview.

both as sites for the regulation of flows – and even coercion – and as symbolic markers of the state. In the absence of barracks or forts, which dominated the landscape in earlier times, checkpoints materialise the sites and decisions of the state. The development of this particular institution does not, however, result from a precise marking of the territory; its primary function is to control internal flows.

The fixation of external borders is, on the contrary, subject to question. The cities of Jarabulus and Tell Abyad in northern Syria may serve as crossing points between a controlled area and an external space (in this case Turkey), but this situation did not originate with IS, which uses already established positions. No specific trace, no line seals the end of IS's sovereignty to make way for another sovereignty – a logic which the battle of Kobani / Ayn al-Arab well illustrated. Three reasons have been put forward to explain this state of affairs. First, in the logic of expansion and conquest, it seems futile to delimit with precision the area under claim. Second, the incessant movement of territorial losses and gains at the microlocal level is a concrete reality that has prevented the effective stabilisation of borders – with the exception, over the past few months, of the border adjoining the governorate of Iraqi Kurdistan. Third, any limit of sovereignty implies mutual recognition by state actors. Yet, IS does not appear to seek recognition on the international stage: it has not pursued the exchange of diplomatic representatives, nor has it recognised its neighbouring states. It has denounced the borders of other state entities, which it describes as colonial, but has done nothing to limit its own sphere of control. The spatial projection of this political venture is thus elucidated: The establishment of a “state” (*dawla*) resembles first and foremost the domination of a territory with blurred contours.

Territorialisation constitutes an innovation; yet in the case of the caliphate, this innovation echoes the imperial rather than the state model. To better grasp this point, two series of observations can be made with respect to two objects: allegiance and institutional control. The first term is key to understanding the relationship between populations (individuals and groups) and the new authorities. Every member of a community under IS control is called upon to pledge allegiance (*bay`a*) to the new dignitaries. Several videos display this new ritual.²⁴ Allegiance is more than a simple procedure: It symbolically integrates one or several individuals into the new political entity. Yet here it does not rest on a clearly defined code, but on mutual recognition between he who gives the pledge – thereby marking his temporary or permanent acceptance of domination by the other – and he who receives it. Indeed, the latter takes into account the local conditions that lead to allegiance, as the two following examples show. During ISIS's advance on the outskirts of Deir al-Zur,²⁵ a general of the Free Syrian Army was faced with the following alternative: He could either engage in a suicidal battle against the forces of ISIS, or give personal allegiance to the organisation without asking his men to follow suit. By choosing the latter option, the general became the representative of ISIS on the Deir al-Zur front against the forces of the Syrian regime. A few hundred kilometres away, in the Idlib province east of Aleppo, a group of men formerly belonging to the *Ahrār al-shām* movement gave allegiance to the new caliph, a few days after most of its general staff were killed. In this second example, it is the entire armed group that switched allegiance. These two cases recall a central feature of the

²⁴ As suggested by researcher Félix Legrand. For an analysis of tribal mobilisations linked with the Islamic State, see Félix Legrand, “The colonial strategy of ISIS,” *Policy Alternatives*, ARI, June 2014.

²⁵ This story echoes other narratives that were formulated in semi-directed interviews conducted in the first half of October 2015 with Syrians in Gaziantep.

allegiance process: It depends on the status of the persons involved at the time of the pledge, but in no way harmonises their statuses. Though all pledgers become members of a new entity, presuming that integration harmonises their statuses would amount to underestimating the new political construction. In reality, IS constitutes a flexible network which links together, in a variable geometry, different groups that acknowledge via allegiance a state of domination or submission, and are granted a set of rights in return.

The other domain in which statuses can be harmonised or differentiated is that of institutional control. But first, let us point out the new divide that has developed between urban and rural areas. According to testimonies gathered among migrants who travel, mostly for economic reasons, between foreign territories and the Euphrates region, IS control is looser in rural zones.²⁶ There is no physical or institutional presence tying a particular village to the political entity, only a simple acceptance of domination. Relative, microlocal autonomy is granted in exchange for subsidies. In urban areas, new structures have been set up to meet the needs of the population that clearly parallel those which link together IS's different political branches. Several offices are thus in charge of issuing, over the entire territory, instructions to facilitate the emergence of an Islamic order. These instructions are translated locally by a set of councils, which themselves oversee other pre-existing councils. Such structures were born, for the most part, out of the need to supervise and daily manage territories after the departure of former administrations. They are responsible for meeting immediate needs, mainly in terms of food supplies. Similarly, a set of courts governed by *sharia* law have been developing since 2013.²⁷ Specifically, these provide certification to personnel and pre-existing procedures which are approved by IS authorities as conforming to the commandments of Islam. The shift in denominations – from ordinary courts to *sharia* courts – is not really accompanied by the production of codes of law. These courts remain, moreover, largely external to the state control apparatus. Lastly, the mode of extraction – as a form of prototaxation – covers three distinct yet complementary realities: the sale of natural resources (mainly oil), the taxation of daily production (for example bread), and the constitution of a war treasure fed by spoils (*ghanīma*) taken during the conquest of positions.

These two domains - allegiance and institutional control - surprisingly evoke other historical realities. The comparison with the Ottoman period may seem dubious, but not if one considers the new political entity as an empire, instead of as a state. Therein lies the meaning of the term caliphate: It defines a new mode of governance that revives the tenets of Muslim tradition – that is, it founds a centre from which the government of Islam radiates out into the lands of *dār al-islām*.

An imperial reality in the post-imperial era?

To some extent, the shocking videos, the massive use of social media, and the control over information and image contradict our initial conclusions. How might a plural entity, wherein street-based command centres are said to radiate out into their immediate environment, produce such discourses? IS's information media, which are duly controlled by local offices and councils,

²⁶ Interview with residents of the Deir al-Zur countryside, October 2014.

²⁷ Adam Baczko, Gilles Dorronsoro and Arthur Quesnay, "Building a Syrian State in a Time of Civil War," *Carnegie Endowment Institute*, April 2013.

reveal the extreme modernity of the marketing work conducted around the political venture. What some have described as a “start-up-turned-multinational”²⁸ also takes after organisations that operate outside the world of politics. In some respects, the group’s literature brings it closer to a non-governmental agency listing its activities in a dynamic balance sheet. Similarly, IS’s handling of advertising is aimed at attracting new recruits and disseminating an image of success and permanence. Thus, the term *bāqīyūn* (“we are staying”) exemplifies the idea of resistance to imperialism – i.e. to the multiple attacks against the mythical community that are allegedly carried out, indiscriminately, by all actors external to the world of IS. The mode of diffusion reveals the organisation’s capacity to adapt to a changing environment. Every local unit can create a new repertoire, which then spreads throughout the organisation. Recently, the killing by fire of a Jordanian pilot, followed by that of forty-five members of the Iraqi security forces, attests to how practices circulate within IS without being necessarily harmonised. IS is not a simple command centre capable of perfectly ordering the conduct of each of its units; the analysis must be complicated by including other features specific to the context in which the organisation has constituted itself.

The state as a sovereign form is being challenged by IS’s cross-border action, and, as we have seen, its mode of deployment over the territories it controls.²⁹ Although its actors claim to have founded a state (*dawla*), their practices echo other registers of action – ones that question the notion of sovereignty as conceived since the Westphalian moment and the modernisation of the state in Europe. However, far from constituting a return to former modalities of governance, IS reveals the adaptability of a postmodern form of public action. Its language is performative: The real and virtual definition of IS as a state constructs social networks that integrate individual and collective units. Its discourse and the shaping thereof take after non-governmental organisations more than administrative offices. This hyper-modernity explains both the success and limitations of the political venture. Though it claims to be a state, IS cannot reap the benefits of sovereignty, such as loans, partnerships, etc. It is a caliphal structure, but it is also a polyarchical entity that effectively responds to rapidly changing realities. IS resembles a political form beyond the state, or a post-state form, more than it does a new manifestation of the crisis of the state. It embodies changes in the territorial inscription of public authority in the early twenty-first century – changes that certainly result from the contestation of regional authoritarianism by popular protests of a rare magnitude, but also, more generally, from the disruption of the state system as it was instituted over the long contemporary period.

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²⁸ Loretta Napoleoni, *L’État islamique: Multinationale de la violence*, Paris, Calmann-Lévy, 2015.

²⁹ This does not take into account IS’s recent extension into Libya and Egypt – a situation that nevertheless confirm our previous observations.