



ISIS the Governor: Strategies of Urban Control and its Sustainability

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## **DEDICATION**

*To my father, who taught me the pursuit of knowledge is an endless and rewarding endeavor. To my mother, who has supported both my academic and professional goals throughout my life. Without the both of you, I would not be at the University of Michigan or following my dreams.*

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## CHAPTER 1: ISIS in Context

### Introduction

This thesis seeks to answer key questions about Islamic State of Iraq and Syria's (ISIS) behavior within the city, namely its urban governance strategies. First, how does ISIS exploit its control of urban terrain? The term *exploit* underlines the nature of ISIS' relationship with its cities. Its urban presence is not permanent nor fully accepted, therefore the group takes advantage of a city's space, resources, and populations while it can. Further, the relationship between ISIS and the city is best defined as coercive because the group imposes itself upon city life and uses a variety of methods to maximize the benefits of its presence: strategic violence to elicit support and control populations, the dissemination of propaganda and takeover of city infrastructure, sophisticated documentation of its urban activities designed to counter its adversaries' narratives, and the integration of ideology in pursuit of the population's socialization. Urban space also serves as a useful tool for ISIS' deployment of violence, especially for execution events centered in city squares and gathering points.

Furthermore, how does ISIS' preference to govern territory affect its sustainability as an organization? While there are many aspects of ISIS to analyze, I choose to focus on the group in an urban context and at the organizational level. The city and organizational sustainability are intricately tied together due to the central role these environments now play in ISIS' organizational framework. Declaring a *caliphate* in 2014 and seizing major territorial possessions from incumbent governments and varying rebel groups boosted the group's prominence, numbers, and capabilities, but an over-reliance on urban terrain exposes insurgencies like ISIS to the inevitable loss of territory. As territorial losses increase, ISIS is forced to respond and adapt, thus, its cities represent sites of transition away from overt

governance. ISIS' experience from governing, the presence of urban networks, its influence online, the existence of multiple affiliates outside of Iraq and Syria, and historical organizational roots are all valuable assets as the group manages these setbacks and defeats.

This chapter builds a necessary foundation for my discussion of ISIS' strategies in the city and organizational sustainability. I begin with a history of conflicts in both Iraq and Syria and their contributions to ISIS' evolution and growth. In addition to these histories, I provide motivations for addressing this topic and review past literature on the use of strategic violence in civil war and the role of urban terrain in insurgency. I then define major terminology, including *insurgency, terrorism, guerilla warfare, control, and legitimacy*. These terms are utilized throughout the thesis, and play an integral role in understanding ISIS' tactics, organizational structure, and the nature of its governance.

## **1.1: A Modern History of Iraq and Syria's Conflicts**

### **I. IRAQ**

ISIS is a complex insurgency that arose from a set of complex factors and deep history. Its organizational roots are found in Abu Musab Zarqawi, the former leader of al-Qaida in Iraq (AQI). Zarqawi traveled to Afghanistan in the late 1980s just as the anti-Soviet jihad movement was winding down. These would represent formative years in his development as a fierce leader of a terrorist organization that unleashed a bloody sectarian campaign in Iraq after the US invasion. Zarqawi became one of many dissidents and troublemakers of the anti-Soviet campaign who would depart Afghanistan and return to their homelands with revolutionary ideas and fighting experience in hand. He was quickly monitored by Jordanian Intelligence, and spent many years in Jordanian prison alongside al-Qaida ideologue Abu Muhammad al-Maqqisi

(Bunzel, 2015). He eventually returned to Afghanistan in 1999 upon release from prison. On this second trip, Zarqawi met Osama bin Laden, set up a training camp in Herat, and honed his theological stringency. After traveling to Iraq in 2002, Zarqawi established *Jama'at al-Tawhid wal-Jihad* (Organization for Monotheism and Jihad). In 2004, Zarqawi would pledge allegiance to Bin Laden and Aymen al-Zawahiri's al-Qaida, thus officially bringing his group under the al-Qaida umbrella as the Iraq war started. Directly mentioning Zarqawi as a figure to emulate, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi exclaims, "The path that [Shaykh Zarqawi] tread—whose waymarks he put in place and guided toward—those who came after him followed its course. And we, God willing, are following in their footsteps" (Bunzel, 2015).

The US invasion of Iraq and dismantling the of the Iraqi state also helps better understand ISIS' evolution. In the aftermath of the US military's surge into Baghdad in 2003, the US faced immediate consequences of a security vacuum and the disintegration of state order. The transitional Coalitional Provisional Authority (CPA), led by Paul Bremer, was established in March 2003 to replace the Saddam regime after its collapse and facilitate a political process leading to elections and an eventual independent Iraqi government. However, the CPA's political efforts before the start of the 2005 elections were highly controversial and facilitated the growth of the Iraqi insurgency. For instance, Bremer's implementation of de-baathification purged Baathist officials from top layers of the Iraqi government and left "20,000 to 120,000 people unemployed" (Dodge, 2012: 39). Bremer also disbanded the Iraqi Army which led to the unemployment of approximately "400,000 *soldiers*" (Marr, 2012: 268). Both decisions left thousands of former Baath officials without jobs. Consequently, many picked up arms and joined the insurgency battling US forces. US forces would be forced to deal with a multi-faceted insurgency composed of Sunni insurgents like ex-Baath military and intelligence officers, Arab

nationalists, more extreme Salafist fighters and foreign al-Qaida elements, and local tribes. The US also met resistance from Shia insurgents such as the Sadrists and Mahdi Army led by prominent Iraqi Shia cleric and political and militia leader, Muqtada al-Sadr.

Throughout 2006 and 2007 unprecedented sectarian violence broke out from both sides of society following the first post-invasion elections in 2005. During this period, AQI adopted a more domestic look by strategically rebranding itself the “Islamic State in Iraq,” (ISI) and at the time maintained a presence in multiple Sunni majority governorates. This organizational shift underscored the beginnings of a territorial focus, and was advertised as a state for Iraq’s Sunni population. The rebranding did not mean complete separation from core Al-Qaida leadership who offered verbal approval of the declaration, however the relationship grew increasingly fraught since the days of Zarqawi due to tactical disputes and dwindling communication. ISIS’ predecessor exacerbated these tensions with targeted bombings like at the Shia al-Askari mosque in Samarra. These events led the US to drastically alter its strategy in Iraq. On January 10, 2007, President Bush increased US troop numbers in a significant surge. This move was meant to decrease disturbing levels of violence, restore security to central and southern Iraq where insurgents held the upper hand, and protect populations from insurgents on both sides. General David Petraeus led the administration’s Surge strategy and implemented US COIN (counterinsurgency) doctrine, which urged a shift from rooting out insurgents to a population-centric policy designed to protect Iraqi civilians, embed in local areas to provide visible security measures, administer civil services, and gain human intelligence used to tackle insurgent networks. Through US funding, cooptation, and military support, influential Anbari Sunni tribesmen fought al-Qaida and other extremists. This dynamic is known as the “Anbar Awakening.” US troops along with their Iraqi Army and police counterparts cleared areas of



insurgents then proceeded to establish joint security outposts in walled-off security zones. While this strategy worked in reducing violence and turning portions of the Sunni insurgency against al-Qaida, its long-term sustainability would be tested with the entrance of Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki in 2010, and the transfer of managing the Awakening Movement to the Shia-led Iraqi government who viewed the movement as a threat to Baghdad. Maliki's increasing consolidation of power and oppressive reaction to protest movements throughout Iraq from 2012-2013 clouded Iraq's stability prior to the Islamic State's resurgence.

From June to August 2014, the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS) grabbed the world's attention with the swift capture of Mosul and Tikrit, overrunning entire brigades, and marching within miles of the Kurdish capital of Erbil. ISIS' momentum triggered an international response, including a US-led coalition air campaign that continues into its fifth year. Most recently, the US and its partners have taken back most ISIS-controlled cities, with offensives centered on Raqqa and Mosul.

## **II. SYRIA**

In March of 2011, the Arab Spring reached Syria following the eruption of anti-government protests across the Arab world in Tunisia, Egypt, Yemen, and Libya. The international community wondered if the next long-time dictator, Bashar al-Assad, would be deposed or step down in the face of mounting protests. What began as peaceful protests against a dominant Assad family characterized by decades of political cronyism, corruption, and oppression quickly grew into an armed rebellion. The Assad regime deployed tanks and snipers against demonstrators, most notably in the southern city of Deraa known as the "Cradle of the Revolution" (Lister, 2015: 19). Syrian regime officers defected and formed the Free Syrian

Army (FSA), whose original goal was the protection of Syrian protesters from violent government crackdowns. Five years later, Syria's revolution spiraled downhill into an intractable conflict involving more than just rebels and an incumbent government. This is only one dimension of the conflict. From the regime and its Iranian-Russian backers to mainstream opposition and hardline jihadists and Kurdish militias, Syria's conflict has descended into utter chaos. Numerous international actors have joined the fray. The US expanded its anti-ISIS efforts into Syria in September of 2015, launching extensive air raids on ISIS targets along with participation from regional allies like Jordan and the United Arab Emirates. Its campaign continues, largely focused on expelling the Islamic State from its territorial possessions, especially its de-facto capital of Raqqa, and empowering local actors such as the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), Peoples' Protection Units (YPG) and Free Syrian Army (FSA) affiliates and brigades.

A year later, Russia entered the conflict in defense of its historical Middle East client, the Assad regime. Russia has established multiple airbases, deployed its only aircraft carrier off the Syrian coast, and set up air defense systems. Providing ground and air support, Russian assistance has elongated the conflict and enabled Assad's brutal Aleppo siege. Russia supports the regime's indiscriminate bombing campaign, which includes frequent use of barrel bombs and cluster munitions over marketplaces, hospitals, and in some cases, humanitarian convoys. Russian warplanes even used incendiary, phosphorus, and "bunker busting" munitions. (Institute for the Study of War, 2015-2016). These strikes are meant to deny rebel groups the capacity to govern their territory and compel rebel constituents to lobby opposition leadership to accept the regime's terms. Iran also joined on the side of Assad, utilizing its overseas special forces, the Quds Force, bolstering Hezbollah, and sending Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corp (IRGC)

advisors. Turkey crossed the border into Syria in late August of 2015 after initiating *Operation Euphrates Shield*, advertised as an effort to not only erase ISIS' presence from the Turkish-Syrian border, but also to halt Kurdish movement west of the Euphrates and hinder any attempts to establish an autonomous region on its southern flank. As of the new year, Turkey is involved in operations against ISIS in the northern Syrian city of al-Bab, one of the group's last strongholds leading to its capital in Raqqa.

To understand the historical roots of the Syrian uprising, an appropriate place to start is with the Alawite Assad family, who has ruled over Syria since the 1970s. Bashar's father, Hafez al-Assad, became President of Syria in 1971 and remained in office until his death in 2000. His political career began in the Syrian military, where he quickly rose the ranks after graduation from the Syrian Military Academy. Hafez served first as the head of the Syrian Air Force after the 1963 coup that brought the Syrian Ba'athist party into power. He was then appointed defense minister following yet another coup in 1966. After overthrowing his rival Salah Jadid, the chief of staff of the armed forces, Hafez took power and was officially elected President in 1971. Early on during his presidency, Hafez's government battled against the Syrian branch of the Muslim Brotherhood, who had been sporadically targeting and assassinating Baath Party members. Tensions erupted in an event known as the "Hama Massacre" after a Syrian military operation in the city lead to the death of thousands of civilians and destruction of infrastructure. Hafez also pursued strategic political co-optation of Sunni officials and "state-facilitated and directed management of Sunni Islam" (Lister, 27). Moreover, economic disparity was apparent from the start, as Alawi officials received a majority of benefits.

Bashar continued his father's political authoritarianism through the co-optation and incorporation of Sunni religious leaders, tribes, and politicians willing to cooperate. This strategy

included handing top cabinet positions, such as Foreign Minister, to Sunni politicians like the incumbent, Walid Muallem. Once Bashar assumed power, structural weaknesses within Syria that could propel “localized sources of protests” only grew worse (Lister, 19). Economic disparity widened between poor and rich and rising foreign direct investment did not alleviate domestic economic strains. In addition to these stresses, the country suffered from a severe multi-year drought from 2006 to 2010, known as the “worst drought in instrumental record” (Kelley et al, 2014). Syrian farmers relied on this annual precipitation, especially in the northeastern regions of the country. Bashar was not prepared to handle such a crisis with an inefficient state-agricultural policy, specifically through pursuing unsustainable irrigation projects and the overexploitation of groundwater resources. During the 2007-2008 season, the Syrian government was forced to import wheat for the first time in fifteen years (De Chatel, 2014). This situation produced overwhelming migration from rural areas into urban centers. Agriculture was no longer a “financially viable” method of income for approximately 460,000 Syrian farmers (UNHCR, 2011). Migration from rural villages to cities led to the development of sprawling, marginalized suburbs outside of urban centers like al-Hasakah, al-Raqqqa, and Deir ez Zour. (Lister, 2015: 24)

Bashar is also infamous for his use of Alawite-led security apparatuses, the *mukhabarat* (Arabic for *Intelligence Services*) to closely monitor, imprison, and target the regime’s opponents, activists, and protesters. These secret police often held immense influence throughout Syrian cities, and ensured that increased wealth throughout the early 2000s ended up in their lap. Detainment and excessive force perpetrated by security officials against civilians represented one of the triggers for the growing revolution, especially in Deraa where fifteen schoolboys were arrested by members of the “Political Security Directorate” for spray painting a phrase that

would echo throughout the revolution: الشاب يريد إسقاط النظام “The people want the fall of the regime” (Lister, 2015: 12). Their detainment became a rallying call for protests against corruption and crackdowns. On 18 March, Deraa locals and family members protested and demanded the boys’ release. Security forces opened fire, setting a new precedent in quelling protests that would become a catalyst for more sustained, nation-wide protests.

The Syrian Revolution also helps outline ISIS’ rise. The Assad regime’s brutal crackdown on opposition and the emergence of another state collapse enabled ISIS’ predecessor, ISI (Islamic State of Iraq) to find new safe havens and expand beyond Iraq. ISI possessed networks, some of which were enabled by Bashar’s intelligence apparatus itself (Lister, 2015), used to facilitate the travel of fighters and weapons during the U.S.-Iraq War. Bashar hoped to export an internal extremist threat, yet this policy backfired, as hardliners returned to Syria tapping into the same networks. The downward spiral of Syria’s Arab Spring protests presented an opportunity for ISIS leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi to exploit the revolution and secure a strong foothold in newly contested regions of Syria. In 2011, al-Baghdadi quietly sent his most trusted officer, Abu Muhammad al-Joulani (now the leader of Nusra or Jabhat Fatah al-Sham, al-Qaida’s wing in Syria) across the Syrian-Iraqi border to fight Bashar and embed within the Syrian Revolution. Furthermore, in June 2014 amidst its shocking military advances, Baghdadi re-branded ISI as *ISIS*, the *Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant* and declared a caliphate the same month. This unilateral decision did not rest well with everyone, including Joulani, who refused to operate under the new “ISIS” banner, rejected Baghdadi’s claim as caliph and his hasty restoration of the Islamic caliphate, and remain aligned with Aymen al-Zawahiri and the al-Qaida core. The ISIS-al-Qaida split is centered on Syria, which some analysts consider “patricidal,” (Gardenstein-Ross, 2015). These two groups now find themselves in a bitter split to

implement their goals amidst the revolution. ISIS moved fast to declare a caliphate, creating many enemies in the process and defying traditional extremist wisdom on establishing a state.

ISIS has lost momentum since its unprecedented sweep across Iraq in the summer of 2014 and early entrance into the Syrian debacle. It faces pressure not only from coalition airstrikes against key infrastructure, sources of revenue, and leadership, but also on the front lines against a dizzying array of actors, including the Kurdish Peshmerga, Syrian Kurdish YPG (People's Protection Units) militia, Iraqi military, Syrian opposition groups, Iranian-backed Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF), and to a lesser extent the Turkish and Syrian militaries who are largely focused on their own security objectives. Since 2015, ISIS has lost numerous territorial holdings and with major sources of revenue, support, and legitimacy.

## **1.2 Literature Review and Motivation**

### **I. Inside Insurgent Governance – Organizational and Micro-Level Analysis**

The war against the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (ISIS) rages on. Media in the US and abroad provides constant coverage of coalition military efforts against ISIS in Iraq and Syria, and attempts to shed light on the growing humanitarian disaster after more than five years of conflict. Missing is an in-depth discussion of what goes on inside ISIS-controlled cities. Moreover, the relationship between extremist, non-state actors in Syria and Iraq and the civilian populations they seek to control can be overlooked. Communities are assumed to be either supportive of insurgents or complicit in their violent acts. It is important to delve further into the black box that is insurgent governance structures and study how insurgents construct informal governance structures amidst instability in addition to civilian agency and response to these structures. Edward Miguel and Christopher Blattman (2010) agree that future researchers should

pursue studies at the subnational scale to analyze conflict “causes, conduct, and consequences at the level of armed groups” (8). I deal with conduct by describing how ISIS controls its cities and treats populations in its territory. In relation to consequences, I demonstrate how organizational capacity centered on urban terrain affects sustainability and trajectory.

When exploring insurgent governance amidst civil war, one should also consider how violence and coercion are used in strategic manners. In other words, these are not passive or empty means of control. It is difficult to assess violence from our traditional viewpoints as *rational or strategic* when we are constantly reminded of the depravity and irrationality of terrorism after attacks like in Paris, Brussels, and San Bernardino. Berman (2009) agrees that viewing “terrorists as thoughtfully choosing tactics may strike some readers as odd, given their media characterization as irrational” (23). As images and footage of “Jihadi John,” beheadings of Western journalists, massacres of Iraqi soldiers and prisoners, and the burning of a Jordanian pilot flash across our screens, we are accustomed to viewing ISIS’ violence and depravity through a singular lens: reckless and devoid of meaning. Yet inside ISIS’ cities, the group is playing a strategic game to maintain its rule.

Another purpose of this thesis is to help reframe how analysts, students, experts, and leaders determine victory and defeat when confronting insurgencies like ISIS. This type of conflict is unique and often lies outside conventional understanding of military doctrine. Some of the US’ most pressing security concerns come from insurgents. For instance, while taking back territory is certainly a welcomed development against ISIS, the fight continues beyond this stage. Victory should not be measured solely on the percentage of cities taken back. Expelling ISIS from a city is one thing. Securing and stabilizing it, deterring future attacks, and dismantling networks is another. Further, insurgency’s prevalence is rooted ancient history and it remains the

predominant form of conflict in our contemporary era. As O'Neill (2006) informs us, "Insurgency, of course, is hardly a new phenomenon, as Roman armies could have reported from Gaul, Judea, or elsewhere . . . [i]t would be difficult, perhaps impossible to find many volumes on political history that do not mention rebellions, revolutions, uprisings, and the like" (1). We should strive to understand how ISIS is both unique and similar to past insurgencies who also pursued governance objectives. Understanding governance strategies and factors that determine civilian loyalties and opposition in addition to a group's sustainability will be helpful in grasping how today's most threatening non-state actors function and take on new forms of resistance.

## **II: Contemporary Authors on the Islamic State**

ISIS in its current phase is a new phenomenon, and scholarship is still growing since its surge across Iraq in the summer of 2014. Researchers focus on a wide-range of topics, including ideology, theology, propaganda, governance methods, military capabilities, and historical perspectives (Caris and Reynolds, 2014; Lister, 2015; McCants, 2015; Weiss and Hassan Hassan, 2015; Zech and Kelly, 2015; Zelin, 2016). In the context of discussions about ISIS' future sustainability, some authors examine the foundations of the Islamic State and how it can endure while exploring its past networks in Ninewa and Anbar provinces that perpetuated its presence and operational capacity during and after the US-Iraq War (Shapiro et. al, 2016).

Most notably, McCants (2015), translates Arabic primary sources to give insight into the group's apocalyptic, eschatological beliefs, governance measures, brand production, and ultimate vision. Charles Lister (2015), a leading expert on the Syrian insurgency and the myriad opposition groups participating, provides a chronological background to the downward spiral of the Syrian conflict, ISIS' place in the revolution, its organizational structure and long history,



and bitter rivalries with other organizations like its predecessor al-Qaida. Another major publication comes from terrorism expert Aaron Zelin (2016), who establishes a framework for ISIS' consolidation of territory. This study also lends further insight into ISIS' various apparatuses utilized to oversee its populations, such as its religious police (*al-Hisbah*) and propaganda distribution. In the context of ISIS' strategic use of violence, Zach and Kelly (2015) study civilian beheadings, and the goals of using this tactic, namely recruitment and deterrence.

Similar to my approach here, Berman (2009) emphasizes the vulnerability aspect of insurgency that can help us more broadly understand the viability of what he calls *radical religious groups*, such as the Taliban, Hezbollah, and Hamas. He identifies the common *Achilles heel of coordinated violence* among militias and radical religious groups that contributes to or detracts from their longevity: the ability to control defection and leaks (Berman, 2009: 14) through the provision of goods and services. Mampilly (2011) also pursues a similar focus on the "limitations of a political and social order produced by a non-state or, more accurately, by a counter-state." (50). I locate these "limitations" within urban environments, and ISIS' emphasis on urban governance. Finally, some experts adapt the study of fundamental revolutionary warfare theories from Che Guevara's Focoism and Mao Zedong's People's War to bring greater depth to ISIS' structure, formation, and evolutionary stages as an insurgency (Barr et al. 2015). This is a welcomed contribution because these historical theories utilized by past revolutionaries are useful in explaining ISIS' evolution, flexibility, and growth as an insurgency.

### **III. Urban Terrain**

While a great deal of research and literature covering insurgency, terrorism, and civil war identifies the actors in given conflicts or conflict causes, it is equally important to examine

geographical, territorial, and spatial aspects as key determinants of insurgent strategy and its evolution, strength, and vulnerabilities. James Fearon and David Laitin (2003) were some of the first scholars to challenge conventional wisdom on civil war that emphasizes ethnic and religious tensions as main factors behind civil war. They urge an analytical shift away from ethno-religious explanations towards the conditions within a country that favor insurgency, including rough terrain, political instability, poverty, and large populations. Rough terrain, specifically defined by Fearon and Laitin (2003) as mountainous areas, provides a hideout disconnected from the state's control, enables insurgents to utilize guerrilla tactics against superior state forces, and more easily deter denunciation due to its extensive local knowledge of the populations (80).

However, when looking at the region covered in this thesis, the Middle East's most prominent security threat, the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) challenges state control across numerous cities and urban centers.<sup>1</sup> Therefore, urban terrain and bases may also favor insurgency because it provides numerous benefits to insurgents, such as the ability to maximize mobilization and recruitment, extort the population, visibly demonstrate violent punishment, exploit urban space for propaganda and secure necessary resources. That is not to say urban terrain is entirely beneficial. As I will demonstrate, urban control is an inherently vulnerable strategy. Beyond a temporary stage of contesting state population centers, insurgencies must adapt after the eventual recapture of its cities or losses to incumbent governments and rivals.

Numerous scholars who investigate the spatial aspects of insurgency and civil war have centered their analyses on the urban realm. George Le Blanc (2013) contends insurgency is often thought of as "rural affair" while Staniland (2010) notices a "rural bias" in civil war studies.

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<sup>1</sup> ISIS' territory will be referred to throughout this thesis as "urban terrain, environments, or space." The goal is to emphasize the spatial aspects of its control. Urban terrain and space goes beyond the strict confines of a city to sometimes incorporate surrounding areas.

Ashworth (1991) describes the presence of civilians as a constraint for urban battlefield strategies. How counterinsurgents approach these populations is dependent upon a government's "political or humanitarian considerations" (Ashworth, 1991: 119). These constraints prevent certain states from pursuing urban annihilation against cities where insurgents reside. Insurgents know their presence will not be challenged with airpower in certain districts or spaces of the city if they integrate amongst large population centers or practice "physical concealment (merging with the civilian population and the like)" (Ashworth, 1991: 88). This is applicable to the US, whose official policy is to minimize civilian casualties. These constraints are a major theme I touch upon further in my discussion of how ISIS exploits its urban control and dense population centers to shield itself, what I call *urban shielding*.

Furthermore, a number of scholars have contributed to the analysis of cities as major sites of warfare, targeting, violence, mobilization, and control (O'Sullivan, 1991; Ashworth, 1991; Graham, 2004; Lester, 2008; Lohman, 2009; Fuccaro, 2016). In Lohman's (2009) spatial analyses of the Vietnam War, his theoretical framework explains insurgency as both a political and spatial process, and urban networks become the "terrain which mediates the processes of insurgency" (4). Fuccaro (2016) approaches cities in the Middle East and North Africa as centers of "political unrest . . . popular uprisings . . . protracted civil wars . . ." (1). Ashworth (1991), who tracks the stages of insurgency in urban areas, explicitly states that "insurgency is relatively more important in urban than rural areas" (87) due to population density, which makes the onset and sustainability of revolt more likely. Cities are also categorized as "concentration points" (88) for wealth and political power. Further, urban space has been depicted as a "new jungle" where insurgent groups "seeking to mobilize a mass base must go . . ." (Marks 2003: 110, 133). Marks highlights urban space's relegation to the lower rungs of revolutionary theory. Despite the fact

that the urban realm went largely unnoticed in literature, this reality did not slip past insurgents, and “urban action had already played an important role in any number of benchmark conflicts during the era of decolonization” (102).

Insurgents like ISIS have chosen to challenge state control over urban centers. Once in control, the group attempts to gain the population’s favor, integrate their worldview and ideology, and disseminate visible signs of control, power, and influence. (Hagen, 2008). The interconnected relationship between this urban space and how it influences violence (Fuccaro, 2016) or facilitates and produces a “politico-ideological legitimacy” (Lin, 2015: 339) must also be explored, especially considering the group’s extensive production of propaganda and visible punishments centered on urban space. I demonstrate how ISIS’ urban strategies revolve around this complex relationship. In essence, the urban setting favors the type of punishments used by the Islamic State.

ISIS is not the first insurgent group in the Middle East to control urban environments. Al-Qaida in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) provides an excellent example of a group that established cooperative relationships with local, tribal governance structures and prior to a Saudi coalition offensive, controlled the largest port city of Mukalla in Yemen’s coastal province of Hadhramaut. AQAP may possess the ability, thanks to its strategy of avoiding overt violence, to re-enter urban areas as Yemen’s conflict continues. The Houthi rebels are currently holding the country’s capital, Sana’a. Equally relevant, the Taliban, sprouting from southern Kandahar province in 1994, controlled extensive territory throughout Afghanistan after the 1980s Soviet intervention, including the ultimate prize, the Afghan capital of Kabul from 1996 to 2001.

Outside of the Middle East, insurgent groups have also advanced governance objectives and prioritized territorial control (Mampilly 2011; Weinstein, 2007). In Sri Lanka, the Liberation

Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) waged a separatist insurgency and controlled a third of the country at their peak. (Mampilly, 2011: 21-23). In Sudan, the Sudan People's Liberation Movement (SPLM/A) attempted to develop a "comprehensive system of governance" in two of South Sudan's largest cities, Yei and Rumbeck, each with different ethnic makeup (Mampilly 2011: 22-23). Both the Eritrean People's Liberation Front (EPLF) and the Farabundo Marti National Liberation Front (FMLN) in El Salvador controlled significant territory and provided basic services to their populations (Wood, 2014: 464). Further, rebel organizations and insurgencies in Mozambique, Uganda, and Peru formed governance capacity and "organized violence" (Weinstein 2007: 61). ISIS falls into a long list of rebel groups in many regions of the world who executed governance strategies in pursuit of their objectives.

#### **IV. Strategic Use of Violence**

Along with the governance of urban terrain comes a strategic choice by rebels and insurgents to attain support and maintain rulership in the face of new challenges. The use of violence and coercive methods to control populations is a strategy frequently deployed by insurgent rulers to achieve this aim. Kalyvas' (2003; 2006; 2014) writings are particularly helpful when discussing defection, the identification problem, and how the distribution of territorial control shapes collaboration possibilities, loyalties, and civilian support in relation to ISIS. Kalyvas' (2006) theory of control defines how the level and intensity of violence are linked to which actors in civil war exercise sovereignty over a particular region. He also investigates the "paradox" behind indiscriminate violence in civil war, which is defined as targeting based on group membership (97). Kalyvas uses the term "paradox" due to the counterproductive nature of such violence, and observes that groups are more likely to use indiscriminate violence early on,

however, will switch to selective violence as it is more effective in the long run. (Kalyvas, 2003). Indiscriminate violence is contrasted with selective violence, which instead of targeting solely on affiliation, is a more personal and seeks to target based on actions. In the context of ISIS, selective violence is often used against specific individuals participating in opposition networks or those accused of spying on the group. Kalyvas (2003) argues that insurgents elect to use indiscriminate violence because it is “cheaper.” Constraints such as a lack of sufficient information, or what Kalyvas labels “informational asymmetry,” may hamper efforts to more selectively target or decrease more alienating forms of violence. In essence, insurgent violence should be seen as a means of controlling populations and a resource designed to “shape” behavior and compel loyalty. (Kalyvas, 2003: 100).

While researching the insurgent-civilian relationship and how these actors use violence against civilians, other scholars shift the focus from the governors to the governed, thus demonstrating that civilians can also influence insurgents. (Mason, 1994; Blattman, 2006; Mampilly, 2011; Ottman, 2015). In other words, governance by sub-state actors is not a one-way street. The dominant narrative in our approaches to civilians under rebel control treats them as unitary actors, either fully supportive of or against insurgents, (Blattman, 2006) or “as passive victims of violence or accomplices to the insurgent organization” (Mampilly 2011: 21). This same narrative applies to discussions of civilians under ISIS control. I navigate beyond the assumptions of complete support or apathy and demonstrate how civilians make strategic decisions in the face of ISIS governance. Hirschman (1970) presents economic modeling that explores how members of an organization respond to organizational decline through *exit*, *voice*, and *loyalty* (EVL). While Hirschman (1970) mainly organizes response sets to decline in business settings, these insights are relatable to state or insurgent decline. Exit, voice, and loyalty

represent the choices civilians make in the face of rapidly shifting conflict dynamics, such as during the entrance of insurgents into new territory.

Mampilly (2011) chooses, like Kalyvas, to analyze violence deployed by insurgent groups not as a random, irrational strategy, but as a deliberately useful tactic designed to ultimately maintain or acquire support and achieve concessions. First, in a comprehensive study looking at variation in rebel governance, case studies involving Sudan's People Liberation Movement/Army (SPLM/A), Sri Lanka's Tamil Tigers, and the Congo's RCD Goma rebel group demonstrate how violence is used to achieve support. These groups, like ISIS, all prioritized administering civilian populations at some stage in their existence. In addition, Mampilly (2011) challenges the traditional understanding of the "state" as a main supplier of governance, and argues multiple groups may exert their agenda within a single territory. He introduces the term "counter-state sovereignty," defined as rebel-governed spaces existing alongside and competing with states for control while seeking to understand the limitations of these non-state political processes. It is important we see ISIS as functioning within a broken state as one of the many providers of governance. It is in these ungoverned spaces that ISIS thrives.

Weinstein (2007) and Wood (2010) lend crucial insights into the factors that influence what type and the intensity of violence used against civilian populations. Wood (2010) addresses how conflict fluctuations influence insurgents' use of violence. As insurgents weaken, Wood (2010) contends they must work harder to sustain support, thus leading to an escalation in the use of strategic violence to deter defections. Similarly, as a state loses territory, so will it act against civilians with higher levels of violence to deter collaboration with its rebel adversaries. Wood also discusses how insurgent organizational strength affects the choice to use indiscriminate versus selective violence. More powerful rebel groups are able to selectively

apply violent measures to ensure support due to their capacity to provide other benefits. On the contrary, for weaker rebel groups, violence compensates for the lack of other incentives, such as the capacity to deliver services and provide safety. Weinstein (2007) applies an “economic framework for understanding rebel organizations” (22), and introduces a resource-centered, opportunity argument that investigates how the availability of resources impacts the violence deployed. Weinstein also presents highly applicable analyses on challenges rebel organizations must face, including *recruitment, control, governance, violence, and resilience* (43-45). As we will see, ISIS is forced to deal with these classical mobilization and sustainability constraints throughout its tenure, like many insurgent groups before it. Both studies are highly applicable to my focus on the Islamic State, and its behavior and strategies to deter opposition and provide sufficient resources to “entice support” (Wood, 2010).

### **1.3 Defining Terminology**

#### **I. Terrorism and Guerilla Warfare**

ISIS terrorism is deeply psychological and political, attracts a global audience, and seeks to elicit shocks, responses, and shifts in Western societies while disrupting efforts to restore stability and governance to liberated areas, especially in Iraq. Beyond ISIS, the definition of terrorism has proven to be elusive and mutable throughout history. As some authors have shown, it changes throughout political history (Hoffman, 2006; Endler and Sanders, 2006). It was understood as mass violence and repression perpetrated by governments against their civilian populations. In the French Revolution, terrorism was viewed in a positive light, attacking those who were not committed to the revolution’s ideals. In a postcolonial context, terrorism’s focus shifted to revolutionary or anti-government struggle. Today, terrorism is articulated as a threat to



stability and society and associated with the War on Terror. Despite its evolving nature, terrorism is inherently political in nature. Terrorism must include the use or threat of violence. Without the violence component, terrorists would be unable to extract a response or shape behavior. Those who conduct terrorist attacks seek a response, concession, or change in policy, and produce long-lasting psychological effects. Indeed, as Hoffman (2006) states, terrorism is the “deliberate creation and exploitation of fear through violence or the threat of violence . . . specifically designed to have far-reaching psychological effects beyond the immediate the victim(s) or object of the terrorist attack. It is meant to instill fear within, and thereby intimidate, a wider target audience . . .” (40-41).

Individuals who perpetrate acts of terrorism may be members of subnational groups with a hierarchical structure or within clandestine networks and cells. Terrorists can act alone, popularly known today as “lone-wolves,” while being ideologically motivated and sympathizing with a group’s aims. On the other hand, perpetrators may act under the direct supervision of an organization’s leadership as an operative. The debate continues whether terrorism is a tool utilized by the weak. ISIS shows in places like Europe, possessing the ability to control networks, launch attacks, and contribute to political shifts is a long-term strength rather than a weakness, especially after territorial loss. Terrorism does not have to stand alone as a strategy. ISIS has fought its enemies in a conventional manner, while simultaneously resorting to asymmetrical, guerilla tactics and terrorism.

*A guerilla campaign* is a type of military confrontation between insurgents and government forces. Instead of fighting head on, an outmatched group prefers to launch hit-and-run, asymmetric style attacks to slowly “bleed” superior forces. Guerilla style attacks involve smaller, highly mobile units and turn to populations for supplies necessary to carry out extended

campaigns (Weinstein, 2007: 29). ISIS uses a mix of tactics against governments and rebels, including conventional and guerilla style confrontation while also carrying out terrorist attacks.

## **II. Insurgency, Insurgents, and Rebels**

ISIS is waging an *insurgency* in Iraq and Syria, meaning it has challenged incumbent government structures and seeks to subvert existing political orders. Central to the definition of insurgency is the nature of conflict (sub-state vs. state) and the desired outcomes. Insurgency is best described as a “process of political change” (Lohman, 2004: 271) between a “non-ruling group and the ruling authorities in which the non-ruling group consciously uses political resources (e.g. organizational expertise, propaganda, and demonstrations) and violence to destroy, reformulate, or sustain” political structures (O’Neill, 2006: 15). ISIS falls under more than one of O’Neill’s (2006) categories. The group articulates both its desire to destroy political systems and reformulate them to fit its own vision. The US Department of State also views insurgency as tied to a political struggle involving “organized use of subversion and violence to seize, nullify or challenge political control of a region.” Nelson Kasfir (2015) agrees with these definitions, namely that insurgency is the effort to alter a political system, whether that be through “reform, secession, or overthrow” (24). Insurgents are non-state actors, often serving as members of armed organizations. Insurgency involves a wide spectrum of motives, such as anarchy, separatism, egalitarianism, and apocalyptic utopianism (O’Neill, 2006: 20-24). ISIS falls under O’Neill’s (2006) definition of a *traditionalist insurgency*, as it wants to restore a political system of the past and articulates “sacred values rooted in ancestral ties and religion” (21). Throughout the thesis, the term *rebel* is most often used to describe historical examples of sub-state governance and violence while *insurgent* refers to ISIS and its governance.

### III. Legitimacy and Control

When discussing ISIS, legitimacy means its ability to maintain its rulership, gain support, suppress opposition and ensure its survivability. Maintaining resilience against various factors, including governing cities constantly targeted by rivals and controlling defection, strengthens its legitimacy. Legitimacy also establishes a relationship between power, authority, and violence. Authority involves a mutual relationship between the governed and governors while violence and coercion become one method of building an authoritative relationship. Power assumes rebels and insurgents can use violence and “generate consent.” (Mampilly, 2011: 52-56). A democratic government that secures rule of law and establishes common understanding between its leaders and citizens is one form of legitimacy our current system embraces. Legitimate authorities are also accountable to international norms and law and “open to opposition” and alternatives (Hurd, 383). This is not the case with ISIS. For instance, in Hurd’s (1999) calculations, compliance towards authority and rules is achieved through multiple “devices,” namely coercion, self-interest, and legitimacy (379). ISIS predominantly utilizes the coercion and violence to construct support and maintain legitimacy, thus occupying a different form of legitimacy that appears “forced” rather than mutually accepted between the ruler and the ruled.

To attain legitimacy, one must have control. Control when analyzing ISIS can be understood as the group’s ability to “exert its power over a defined territorial space and to induce collaboration from the civilian population living within this area” (Mampilly, 2011). Control and legitimacy and terrain all go hand in hand. With nothing to control, no populations exist to coerce, rule, and cooperate with. Consequently, as insurgents lose terrain, their legitimacy suffers. Territory is a key ingredient to the “declaration” of a *caliphate*, making territorial loss

damaging to its legitimacy and narrative of conquest. Kasfir (2015) encourages a shift from understanding rebel control as a form of “sovereignty” to a “degree of domination” held over a territory (25). Rebels and insurgents may hold onto territory without committing resources to governing it but domination relates to legitimacy because it identifies the level of civilian compliance.

#### **1.4 Conclusion**

Multiple factors determine the sustainability of an insurgency, including a group’s ability to interact with other actors, confront its enemies, adapt to shifting conflict dynamics, and garner support. In the case of ISIS, spatial and geographical dimensions of conflict, particularly urban terrain, provide a relevant point from which to study the group’s trajectory, evolution, and development. As Shapiro et. al (2016) agrees, “Relatively little insurgency or terrorism analysis focuses on how militant groups organize themselves geographically or how the geography of militant organizations may influence their collective ability to operate effectively . . .” (83). It is in these environments ISIS carries out major organizational developments, exercises its governance abilities, and defies traditional wisdom of extremist state-building.

Moving forward, the following chapters focus on the various strengths and weaknesses of ISIS’ urban strategies, in addition to civilian loyalties and tribal politics. Chapter two focuses on the benefits of controlling urban terrain, namely the collection and control of resources, and the ability to secure significant population-based revenue. Further, in a more conceptual realm, urban space provides ISIS with a prime setting in which to execute its visible violence. City infrastructure aids the group’s indoctrination processes and integration of religious, ideological,

and political symbolism. Moreover, ISIS exploits urban space and civilian populations to evade politically constrained counterinsurgent efforts.

After acknowledging strengths of governing, chapter three shifts towards the vulnerabilities of urban control, namely both ideational and material losses resulting from territorial defeats and exposure in cities. Coalition and local offensives pressure the group and initiate organizational shocks that ISIS must respond to. Losing territory is connected to aspects of ISIS' legitimacy and the need to maintain a consistent messaging strategy for followers who witness these losses and ponder the group's future role. Chapter four builds off insurgent-civilian interactions and highlights the complex choices civilians make under insurgent political powers. I utilize economic modeling initially introduced by Hirschman (1970) to layout three major options civilians have: exit, voice, loyalty. The concluding chapter brings together all these discussions to analyze the relationship between extensive territorial control and organizational sustainability. I show factors that will help ISIS survive the loss of its territory and properly respond to its transition away from its widespread presence in urban terrain, including its referencing strategies and flexible organizational structure. For ISIS, playing the role of a proto-state becomes a temporary phase of a longer lifespan. Its exit from urban terrain represents the end of one stage and the beginning of another, in which the group will continue to spoil, disrupt, and challenge.

## CHAPTER 2 - ISIS Urban Governance: Advantages and Exploitation

### Introduction:

Cities represent the cultural, economic, and political hubs of our modern society. They are sites where populations, ideas, movements, and tensions converge. In both inter and intra-state war, cities are strategic locations to be retaken, especially recently with conflicts in Syria and Iraq, or impenetrable targets that armies will chose to avoid. Capturing these possessions may represent a devastating defeat for one side, and newfound benefits for another. Additionally, forces may decide that laying siege to a city and launching urban-style campaigns is not worth the costs in lives. Therefore, cities can be advantageous for the use of both offensive and defensive tactics in combat.

Economically, cities are profitable centers of major commerce and trade. When divisions occur between citizens and political authorities, demonstrations and uprisings focus on urban environments. Cities are birthplaces of revolutions and the site of triggers for enduring uprisings, especially during the Arab Spring. City squares and government buildings serve as gathering points, and monuments can evoke emotional memories of historical events. In the context of Syria and Iraq, urban space offers insurgents mobilization and financial incentives in addition to propaganda resources. Moreover, the “show-case functions of cities, their edifices, monuments, and ceremonies present targets of immense symbolic importance” (Ashworth, 110), especially for insurgents like ISIS and governments who seek to remind populations of their presence. In relation to this symbolism and political legitimacy, urban space is a tangible source of power that provides insurgents an opportunity to control populations and integrate its presence.

The city, or *urban terrain*, is central to this thesis. Urban terrain represents both the location of ISIS’ swift rise and the site of organizational transition after its expulsion. This

chapter covers the short-term advantages of ISIS' emphasis on urban governance, especially resource potential and the ability to embed one's presence on the ideological, political, and religious fronts. I begin with a discussion on the ability to plan operations from within the city, and the exploitation of extensive resources and population density that enable ISIS to sustain itself financially, reward its members, and facilitate organizational growth and recruitment. Next, I move beyond the operation and financial realms to emphasize how cities relate to ISIS' project of building legitimacy. This relationship is characterized as not only a monopoly over violence, but also over the arrangement and flow of city space that supplants city infrastructure formerly identified with the incumbent government.

## **2.1 Practical Advantages of Urban Control**

While my argument is centered on the "vulnerability" or "weakness" aspects of insurgent urban governance, the short-term advantages must not be overlooked. Urban control offers many advantages to insurgents who seek to maximize mobilization, increase revenue, distribute propaganda, gain support, and evade politically constrained counterterrorism agendas. This first section explains the operational and resource advantages of urban terrain.

### **I. Operational Space**

According to the US-led anti-ISIS coalition, urban terrain like Raqqa serves as a key logistical hub for meetings, operations, and planning. This provided the impetus to hastily launch Raqqa operations without a unified force amidst rising concern over ISIS' operational space. In late October of 2016, Army Lt. Gen. Stephen Townsend emphasized that there is an "imperative to get isolation in place around Raqqa because our intelligence feeds tell us that there is

significant external operations attacks planning going on, centralized in Raqqa." (*Foreign Policy*, 2016). Raqqa operations are likely to take longer than Mosul due to the complicated political situation, questions over the composition of forces, and tensions between Turkey and the US over the Kurdish YPG (People's Protection Units) short and long-term interests and participation. ISIS will eventually be denied this opportunity in Raqqa, but for now urban terrain like Raqqa may continue to provide a base for planning operations designed to divide coalition partners and punish participants of the anti-ISIS coalition. The desire to isolate and pressure Raqqa is similar to the US' policy of denying al-Qaida operational space and a safe haven in Afghanistan from which the group could launch more attacks.

## **II. Population-Based Revenue**

More than operational opportunities, the most sought after prize is often the resource potential in cities, especially the funds insurgents extract from populations under their control. These sources, what McCants (2015) calls ISIS' "war chest," (98) include various forms of taxes, regulations, prices controls, transportation networks and tolls, market rents, smuggling, property confiscation, extortion, the looting of ancient artifacts, and war bounties also known as *Ghanima* in Arabic (Weiss and Hassan, 2015). Through these sources, ISIS has managed to fund its war machine and governance activities. Most revenue is centered on the territory it controls and the resources that enable ISIS to construct an informal, wartime economy.

First, oil is key to ISIS' finances, as is evident through the US effort to disrupt the transportation and production of oil. In a 2014 testimony to Congress, Matthew Levitt of the Washington Center for Near East Policy emphasized that by September of 2014, ISIS was making approximately \$3 million a day from the sale of oil. Further, Weiss and Hassan (2015)



share that ISIS' former oil emir, Abu Sayyaf, estimated the group's monthly earnings to be \$40 million from the "sale of crude oil" (212). Some of this crude oil is sold to smugglers who then move the oil through various means such as tankers and pipelines. ISIS oil production goes beyond areas under its control as well. While this reality is disrupted since the coalition's enhanced targeting of ISIS' oil infrastructure and the loss of certain territory and borders, ISIS transported crude oil into neighboring countries like Syria and Turkey to be refined into gasoline that is then sold in ISIS markets like in Mosul. (Levitt, 2014). Thus, ISIS seeks to establish a dependent relationship with its populations by providing fuel sources extracted from territory under its control that is resold within its cities. These oil networks were not created out of the blue. As we will see with the sale of ancient Mesopotamian artifacts, ISIS exploits past networks, including those from the Saddam's days, when the Iraqi government sought to evade US sanctions. (Weiss and Hassan, 2015). ISIS even outsources oil production to local engineers and specialists who operate oil wells, sometimes coercing workers to stay in their positions and maintain a refinery or facility's functionality. (Levitt, 2014; Barret, 2014).

Beyond ISIS' lucrative oil sales, the group takes advantage of taxation within its cities to extract as much as possible from civilians. Its' taxes encompass nearly all aspects of urban life. This system includes *zakat*, or mandatory almsgiving. As a citizen journalist from Raqqa told the *New York Times*, ISIS has raised *zakat* rates from the typical 2.5% of a person's wealth to 10%. A *New York Times* report from 2015 estimated that ISIS brought in around \$900 million through taxation and extortion of businesses and residents. Further, a December 2015 investigation by the *Financial Times* indicates ISIS had earned "at least as much from taxation, extortion and confiscation as oil." Businesses must pay up too, including market and shop owners, pharmacies, telecommunications companies, energy suppliers, and construction services (Barret, 2014;

Levitt, 2014; Hassan and Weiss, 2015). Civilians also face frequent fines, especially for civil infractions such as smoking (Hassan and Weiss, 2015: 343).

A prime example of its ability to reap the benefits of controlling urban terrain is through the group's monopoly on the transportation of goods and resources through its territory. For instance, any goods or vehicles, especially those transporting oil, are charged according to the size of their truck and what they are carrying. According to Ahmed Rasheed (2014) in his *Reuters* article, "A large truck must pay \$400, while small trucks are charged \$100 and cars \$50 if they are also carrying goods." Matthew Rosenberg, Nicholas Kulish, and Steven Lee Myers (2015) of the *New York Times* spoke with Mohammad al-Kirayfawai, who "hands \$300 to fighters from the Islamic State for the privilege of driving his refrigerated truck into ISIS-held territory." Thus, ISIS not only profits from the oil it produces and sells to smugglers, but also from taxing the methods of carrying this oil. Overall, its control of urban terrain and access points enable this strategy. For the sake of policy, it is apparent that targeting its sources of revenue and pressuring urban terrain can be crippling to a group whose income to a large extent comes from those under its pressurized rule.

Taxes also affect other basic industries like agriculture. ISIS has forcibly seized property, farm land, and livestock. Farmers must pay taxes in crops, livestock, or money at a price much "higher than what they sell their product for" (Levitt, 2014). For example, Levitt (2014) notes that ISIS commandeered "more than 40% of Iraq's wheat production." Confiscating property, in addition to farmland, is an extremely lucrative practice as well. ISIS rents seized properties to locals and uses them as homes for ISIS fighters and their families in addition to auctioning off places for cash. Shamdeen (2014) notes in her report on ISIS' entrance into the real estate market that most of this property belongs to minorities, Shia, former Iraqi officials, or locals who fled or

were killed upon ISIS' entry into the city. She concludes, "They have 'inherited' houses, industrial real estate and agricultural land around the areas they control in the province of Ninawa . . . the result of all this property: another huge source of funding for the extremist group." In another example, Abu Khaled, an ISIS defector interviewed by Hassan and Weiss (2016), explains that those who flee ISIS territory will have all their "property and assets seized. Land, houses, stores, everything . . . The building I used to live in in al-Bab belonged to a guy they accused of working for the regime. So they seized the whole building . . ." (339). Its profits do not stop there and involve sale of antiquities from ancient sites residing in its territorial control. A *Washington Post* report in November of 2015 noted that US estimates indicate ISIS made more than \$100 million per year from the sale of antiquities. These items would find their way into Turkish and Jordanian markets, and then onto Europe and private collectors. Weiss and Hassan (2015) observe that ISIS has "sufficiently institutionalized a decades-old black-market pillage and grave-robbing business . . ." (215).

Straining the population even further, taxes are extended to minorities residing in ISIS territory as well. Non-Muslim residents are forced to pay a *jizyah*, or minority tax, in return for protection and the ability to stay in ISIS' cities. Richard Spencer, in the *Telegraph*, reports that this tax cost "\$720 per male head." Caris and Reynolds (2015) add that the *jizyah* tax was to be paid two times a year to "in order to permitted to live in Raqqa city" (16). From oil sales and smuggling, the control of transportation networks and access points around major cities, extensive taxes on businesses and minorities, traditional extortion, the seizure and appropriation of property, looting of banks, and collection of war bounties, ISIS truly finds revenue wherever it may be.

### **III. Urban Shielding**

Hiding amongst civilian populations, or what I call *urban shielding*, is a prominent ISIS strategy and another short-term benefit of ISIS' urban control. Urban shielding refers to ISIS' integration into dense civilian areas to protect itself from coalition targeting, and is most effective when used against an opponent, like the US, who is weary of civilian casualties. Shielding becomes a defense barrier, for both fighters and military assets, against the coalition's close watch and targeting abilities. ISIS is deeply intertwined in population centers and recognizes that the US will likely think twice about launching risky strikes in areas with significant civilian populations. Will McCants solidifies this assessment in his concluding discussion of what to do against ISIS, "Attacking from the air will degrade the Islamic State but will not destroy it. Its soldiers are in urban areas where they are hard to target without killing thousands of civilians" (156). Even for those actors who consistently disregard civilian life and do not uphold norms incorporating humanitarian considerations, their extensive bombing campaigns largely ignore ISIS' cities. Indeed, the Assad regime's passiveness towards ISIS' presence in Raqqa is one reason ISIS does not have to worry about Syrian regime bombarding its capital to the same degree as rebel-held areas. The regime largely focuses on mainstream opposition that poses a more direct threat to its frontlines and territory. As McCants (2015) explains again, "President Assad had turned a blind eye, happy to let the Islamic State threaten his domestic and foreign enemies as long as it didn't threaten him; 90 percent of all Syrian air assaults . . . fell on the Islamic State's competitors" (98). Thus, ISIS becomes an enemy relegated to secondary importance. It is easy for us to notice this strategy: Aleppo is turned to dust and retaken while ISIS held-Raqqa is untouched.

#### **2.2 Exploiting the City: Propaganda Hubs, Narrative Construction, and Indoctrination**

## **I. Level of Intervention in City Environments**

Unlike settings such as jungles or mountainous terrain where an insurgent conceals his or her presence, cities are open space. Weiss and Hassan (2014) observe that ISIS plays an *everywhere but nowhere* strategy by which the group avoids micromanagement and over-visibility in urban environments. Some examples include the limited display of weapons in public and small numbers of fighters at checkpoints. However, arms control, the protection of weapon resources, and maintaining a low profile is not necessarily reflective of its approach in all its urban centers. ISIS still seeks to integrate its presence into the fabric of urban dynamics and convince populations of its legitimacy. ISIS fighters also establish disruptive checkpoints, conduct frequent patrols with their police forces, make use of punishment squares, and have even denied services like Wifi access in Raqqa in July 2015 (Weiss and Hassan: 181). The level of ISIS intervention in cities varies by location, and particular factors could make governance more complicated or extensive in certain areas. For instance, cities like Raqqa and Mosul, by the nature of their size and symbolic value to the group, require higher levels of intervention than other population centers. These are also cities where ISIS centers greater manpower and resources. In other places, as Hassan (2014) explains, ISIS will outsource governance and administrative roles to local forces in areas where it lacks the manpower to assume these roles, thus maintaining a lower profile. Similar to trends of establishing governance (Zelin, 2015), we can observe that ISIS frequently interferes in its cities and makes its presence known to its populations. Its governance consistently transcends “the realms of taxation and security” (Arjona, 2015: 182) in areas under its control, to include the dissemination of political and ideological symbols, the indoctrination of youth, and the co-optation of infrastructure. ISIS not

only seeks to “control and shape local populations,” but also usurp functions of “governance from erstwhile states” (Barter, 2015: 226). In the end, location, size, and value of territory can affect ISIS’ commitment of resources and level of intervention.

Insurgents like ISIS come face to face with sizable civilian populations. Buildings, squares, monuments, and main avenues are mediums through which insurgents and civilians communicate daily. ISIS checkpoints, re-designing infrastructure and the “co-optation” of prior government infrastructure (Al-Tamimi, 2015), taking over schooling systems and mosque sermons, conducting patrols in marketplaces, and placing Islamic State logos on administration buildings are all methods to surround civilians with an overwhelming presence. As Mampilly (2011) articulates this relationship between ruler and civilian, insurgent expressions of power are meant to “increase the civilian identification with the rebel government . . .” (74). Thus, this relationship between the ruled and rulers goes beyond the formal structures and institutions of governing territory and incorporates “the symbolic processes that governments deploy to give meaning to their actions” (Mampilly, 2015: 77). Mampilly explains that these symbolic processes have two components: both the “coercive and bureaucratic power of the political authority, and those that strengthen identification” (79) between ISIS and its populations. Stronger identification is achieved through the dissemination of political symbols and propaganda that carry with them a degree of legitimacy and serve to remind civilians of insurgents’ capacity. This may be one of the reasons ISIS is quick to setup its *al-Hudud* square to carry out punishments like “crucifixion, beheadings, lashings, and hand amputations” (Weiss and Hassan: 209).

## **II. Urban Space and Organizational Integration**

### **I. Cities as Propaganda Hubs and Spaces of Narrative Construction**

I contend that ISIS' relationship with its civilian populations utilizes these symbolic processes discussed above to ingrain its political power and ideological preferences. Cities for ISIS are prime terrain for increasing legitimacy, visibility, and disseminating propaganda. They are spaces of disinformation, the construction of proto-state apparatuses, and the indoctrination of ideology. These environments are conducive to its recruitment tactics, narrative construction, and visible violence. For a group who claimed a "caliphate," urban terrain is also a fundamental aspect of its legitimacy. Overall, ISIS' governance incorporates symbolic projections of power that serve both "instrumental and normative purposes . . . legitimizing the insurgent political authority" (76). By normative, this means fulfilling the criteria that civilians expect from their government.

In brutal beheading videos, black-clad ISIS fighters instruct their captives to kneel in the sand before a camera and read a message meant to be heard across the globe. These messages are often wordy letters to the US and its allies contributing to the anti-ISIS coalition, blaming specific governments and political leaders, like former US President Barack Obama and British Prime Minister James Cameron, for not meeting ISIS' unrealistic demands. Then comes the beheading. Steven Sotloff, James Foley, David Haines, Alan Henning, and Peter Kassig are all victims of this gruesome execution style, which represents just one form of communicating with Western governments fighting the Islamic State. Urban environments also offer ISIS another form of communication, specifically the opportunity to boost media operations and space to create their own facts on the ground counter to Western depictions of its actions and viability. The Islamic State commonly exploits prisoners as the State's mouthpieces to narrate events

within its own lens. For example, British journalist John Cantile was captured by ISIS in 2012 in Syria along with James Foley. He has played an integral role in ISIS media releases ever since his capture, appearing in multiple videos on the streets of Mosul, including in December 2016 while the Mosul campaign raged on. He reads from ISIS scripts that expose the “flaws” of the US’ strategy to defeat the group. John’s videos chastise the US for its targeting of non-military ISIS structures, such as a media hut or structures within the confines of Mosul University. Furthermore, he elaborates on the economic costs and burdens of the US-led war on ISIS, and dismisses “Western propaganda” that paints a poor picture of life within ISIS-controlled cities.

To ISIS, Mr. Cantile serves a dual purpose. He not only criticizes anti-ISIS coalition members, but also constructs a sophisticated counter narrative that depicts a stable urban setting and portrays civilians and valuable infrastructure as victims of reckless targeting. Aside from exploiting vulnerable prisoners like Mr. Cantile to present a rosy image of life under ISIS governance and efficient bureaucracy, ISIS has managed to advertise its ideology, structure, and governance habits through official Western media channels and journalists too. In December of 2014, *Vice News* released a widely-popular, five-part documentary titled “Inside the Islamic State.” *Vice News* reporter Medyan Dairieh followed Islamic State Press Officer, Abu Mosa, and *Hisbah* patrol leader, Abu Obida, through the streets of Raqqa and witnessed trade regulations, checkpoints, Syrian regime positions, religious patrols <sup>2</sup>, prayer regulations, legal procedures, children's indoctrination and education, and propaganda efforts.

## **II. Integration of Symbolism and Ideological Projection**

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<sup>2</sup> *Al-Hisbah* patrols are a key element of ISIS governance and oversight, judging from its heavy investment in this sector in Raqqa province. The term means *accountability* and is one arm of enforcing religious guidance and law. These patrols, also known as “morality police,” inspect market places and ensure ISIS standards are met in cities under its control.



The same *Vice News* documentary provides us with further examples of ISIS' ideological projection and domination of public space. One of the most compelling aspects of this documentary revolves around the public rallies centered on city squares. These rallies demonstrate the concepts explored by scholars like Hagen (2008) who investigate urban landscapes as a "stage for human action" (349) or spaces for embedding "politico-ideological legitimacy" (Lin, 2015). Hagen (2008) focuses on Nazi propaganda parades in Munich and how these events contain "broader political and cultural relationships of power" (349). This analysis offers an effective way of thinking about how ISIS utilizes urban space, specifically through a "monopolistic" and intrusive relationship. This monopoly on organizing space and violence, integrating ideological symbolism, and harnessing urban landscapes to a group's advantage establishes a compelling vision of political power while projecting the "regime's message" onto public spaces (Hagen, 2008: 349). ISIS propaganda efforts achieve a similar goal through its gradual makeover of city intersections, public spaces, and infrastructure. These efforts articulate its ideology and interpretations to the population, perpetuate counter-narratives, and strengthen indoctrination techniques. March and Revkin (2015) agree that ISIS' construction of governance and political symbols associated with it are based on legitimizing the "monopoly on violence, resource extraction, and political authority." These concepts have yet to be compared to ISIS' swift ideological "projection" on the streets of Raqqa and Mosul. "ISIS has communicated this relationship in its cities through a variety of methods. These include raising its flag on a number of poles and buildings throughout its cities, erecting propagandistic billboards that articulate its interpretations, crafting custom signs along roads and intersections, redesigning administrative buildings and city entrances with ISIS insignia, and pursuing infrastructure improvements such as paving and painting" (Zelin, 2014: 4).

In an even more unique case of ISIS cooperating with Western journalism is German journalist Jürgen Todenhöfer, who received official permission from ISIS authorities to travel inside the heart of the Islamic State's territory. Unsure of the authenticity of ISIS' official invitation and promise of protection, Jurgen risked his life to venture there, especially with the fate of other journalists who dared enter this war zone. For many who read his post-trip reflections or viewed his videos, this was a one-of-a-kind, rare window into the Islamic State's largest territorial possession: Mosul. In a video from late 2014, Jurgen interviewed a number of ISIS members on a hill overlooking Mosul's skyline during the dusk hours. Behind Juergen and the fighters, one can hear the incessant sound of car horns and traffic. Life appears normal, with people out and about. The location is probably carefully chosen to "show off" aspects of Mosul.

Just like advertising to the world through interviews with Western journalists, the rallies discussed above also serve a strategic purpose. They have become mass spectacles, intent on attracting large crowds, attention, and potential recruits. During "Caliphate Celebrations," kids wave ISIS flags and don black bandanas and AK-47s. ISIS fighters pass out sweets to the crowd while a fervent ISIS speaker announces the group's successes and future victories while directly calling for support of their rule. Per usual, these events are also prime spaces to express ISIS ideology, denounce enemies and recruit. Aaron Zelin (2015) points out that these types of events are part of its *dawa* (invitation) phase by which the group introduces its population to its way of thinking by reaching out and "hosting public viewing parties of official ISIS media" (quoted in *Brookings*).

### **III. Socialization and Indoctrination: Education**

Focusing one's efforts on socializing and indoctrinating vulnerable portions of the population and regular members is not a modern phenomenon among insurgent groups. This is a historical strategy viewed by many other groups as essential to translating their aspirations and ideology to new populations. The Shining Path (Sendero Luminoso) gained many recruits through its networks of mobilized university students in the regions around the Universidad Nacional de San Cristobal de Huamanga. These students preached the group's ideology back in their own rural communities and ensured a steady flow of new recruits, including "the next generation of young people" (Weinstein, 2007: 117). Yoweri Museveni, the leader of Uganda's National Resistance Army (NRA) opposed to the Obote regime, exploited extensive local contacts to spread his group's ideology. These clandestine urban networks incorporated intensive political training, requiring students recognize the group's political aims and guerilla strategies prior to taking part in operations (Weinstein, 110).

In addition to hosting mass rallies to condition the population and presenting its control as stable to journalists like Juergen and outlets like *Vice*, ISIS also embeds its ideology and authority through religious education, military camps, and court systems. An ingredient to successfully embedding one's ideology is targeting the vulnerable, "socializing" youth, and normalizing violence. ISIS hopes to generate the next generation of fighters and members, realizing it must secure sympathizers who will carry on the group's legacy. Mahmoud, a resident of Mosul, interviewed by *BBC* shares this sentiment when he claims, "I've come to the conclusion that the goal of this organization is to plant the seeds of violence, hate and sectarianism into children's minds." The group targets youth through a variety of methods, including religious services, *dawa* events, and more permanent education programs in areas of higher population. For instance, In the *Vice* documentary, youth are seen pledging allegiance to

Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi in the Al-Fordos Mosque in Raqqa. Viewing parties are hosted throughout its cities displaying its new media releases and a “proliferation of nuqtat al-alamiyah (media points)” disperse official ISIS media and announcements to locals, with a focus on youth and teens. (Zelin, 2015: 2-3).

The group also edits school curriculums and rewrites histories to sustain its message and influence worldviews. The same resident, Mahmoud, while discussing his son’s education in Mosul, exclaims, “We immediately removed him from school, as we preferred that he had no education at all than the one IS is promoting.” Aymen al-Tamimi’s (2015) “Aspects of Islamic State (IS) Administration in Ninawa Province,” demonstrates how ISIS has influenced education in cities like Mosul, Tal Afar, and Raqqa. On a smaller scale, ISIS painted murals outlining proper procedures for clothing and messages that highlight education as a means of “cultivating” the “tree of the Caliphate.” In addition, the group has canceled departments and subjects deemed not in line with Sharia and its interpretations. (Tamimi, 2015). This is an effort to control the production of knowledge. As reported by Futoun al-Sheikh (2015) of *Syria Direct*, in early 2014, ISIS closed two schools in Deir e-Zor and Raqqa, citing the “corrupting influence of Baathist curricula.” The group also interfered in Mosul University, released extensive exam schedules, and reformed the curriculum, while in Raqqa it advertised new openings for a local medical school (Tamimi, 2015; Winter, 2015). Beyond introducing changes to existing the schools, ISIS also built its own facilities with teachers and curriculums in eastern Syria (*Syria Direct*, 2015).

ISIS’ educational efforts have ranged from more formal, classroom instruction to informal *dawa* events targeting children and other portions of the population. Analyzing reports circulated by activists inside ISIS territory in addition to ISIS media releases and tweets, Caris and Reynolds (2014) demonstrate that in both Raqqa and Aleppo province the group had the

ability to administer schools. Any efforts to develop more long-term educational plans are likely constrained due to increasing pressure from the US-led coalition upon its cities. Overall, insurgent groups often indoctrinate members, including children, both on the politico-military and ideological fronts. In fact, ISIS does not hide these efforts and has proudly displayed its “instrumentalization” (Winter, 2016) of children across its propaganda platforms, for instance, in its “Cubs of the Caliphate” training camp video. Children have even perpetrated harsh punishments such as beheadings and executions under ISIS supervision. These extreme acts of violence are a part of this socialization to the brutal realities of ISIS, and further groom the mindset needed to convince vulnerable minds of the effectiveness and necessity of such tactics. Moreover, ISIS goes beyond publicly filming the training of children. In March 2015, ISIS released a video of a French child executing a supposed Israeli spy. In July 2016, ISIS filmed a Syrian boy in Palmyra beheading a Syrian officer. A month prior, 25 children executed Syrian regime soldiers in Palmyra’s Roman Theater (Winter, 2015). Based on observations of ISIS media releases, the group also constructs glorified images and obituary-style profiles of teen and children fighters in celebration of their death in battle or following suicide missions. (Winter, 2015). This phenomenon should underline the long-term nature of the fight against ISIS. This conflict has left a long-lasting effect on younger generations under ISIS control who are destined to be scarred from years of strife and have been raised on a destructive mindset.

#### **IV. Courts and Power Projection**

ISIS’ court systems are another method of solidifying the relationship of authority between the group and its populations. ISIS seeks to convince locals of its ability to settle disputes, address complaints, and bring about justice compared to the failures of past governors.

As some authors on the Islamic State point out, ISIS distinguishes its form of jurisprudence to a certain degree. It is known to have resolved disputes lingering from the pre-uprising years, and will ensure complaints against civilians are investigated and closed. These actions have extended to their own fighters for abusive behavior, theft, or extortion. In Deir Ezzor, the group executed one of its leaders accused of “embezzlement and robbery” while in al-Qaim ten ISIS fighters faced the same fate for selling seized tobacco. (Weiss and Hassan, 2015). Even small transgressions such as disobeying ISIS’ smoking ban led to the beheading of an ISIS commander in Syria. (McCants, 2015). While overt punishment of ISIS fighters could be a practical means of appeasing populations expressing grievances against the group in the short-term rather than a genuine effort to hold its members accountable in each case, it benefits its credibility when civilians witness action, response, and accountability.

### **2.3 Conclusion**

ISIS *exploits* its urban terrain to many degrees, meaning it seeks to take advantage of and maximize the many benefits cities offer. The group maximizes its financial gains through the availability of population-based revenue, and controls access points, travel networks, and lucrative resources in areas under its control. Cities also serve the group in terms of legitimacy, propaganda, indoctrination, and narrative construction. ISIS showcases its caliphate and challenges Western efforts and narratives, and its urban terrain represents a stage to broadcast its image to a wide audience and contribute to its “self-presentation” (al-Tamimi, 2015). ISIS media prowess includes its production of biased videos that attempt to show bustling nature of cities, proper facilitation of trade and market dynamics, and routine life. Outside perception and the construction of a glorified image of life under caliphate is one source of its recruitment and a

message to the world that it holds legitimacy in the eyes of those it governs and can run a sophisticated, powerful organization. ISIS has also co-opted infrastructure formerly identified with the Syrian regime and other religions, and articulated its ideology and goals to its populations through the overtaking and refurbishing of city infrastructure with its own political, religious, and ideological symbolism. Through courts and educational efforts as well, ISIS can solidify its process of embedding itself in urban environments. In a calculated move, even children are susceptible to the indoctrination strategies of ISIS. Cities like Mosul and Raqqa are complex propaganda showcases and sites of ideological projection, appropriation, and manipulation. In the words of Michael Weiss and Hassan Hassan (2015) ISIS has “resorted to a sophisticated tool kit of propaganda and disinformation” (169) centered on its urban possessions.

## **CHAPTER 3: ISIS Urban Governance: Weaknesses and Vulnerabilities**

### **Introduction:**

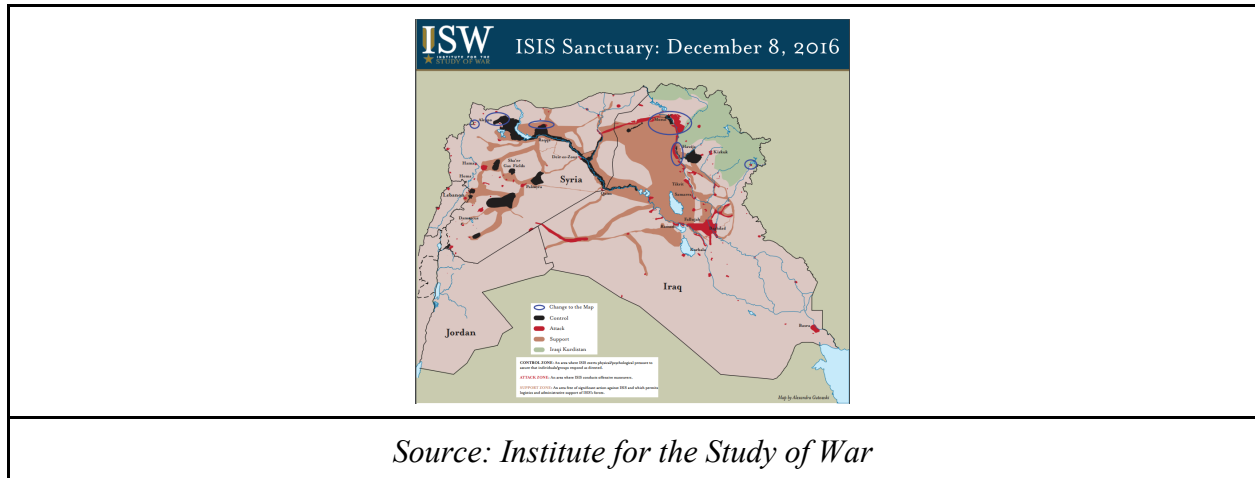
Chapter two discussed a variety of advantages for insurgents who govern urban terrain and the populations residing in these environments. From a wealth of resources, opportunities to embed one's organizational characteristics, plan external operations, and exploit populations to avoid air targeting, cities have no doubt propelled ISIS' strength. However, these same environments also come with their weaknesses that rivals and adversaries can take advantage of. This chapter discusses both material and ideational losses. ISIS' choice to hold onto urban terrain, challenge government and rival control of cities, and administer extensive governance to its populations makes the group a target on the map. This strategy is vulnerable and organizational structure as a result is strained from sustained international campaigns and conflict dynamics that complicate its territorial grip and deny access to various resources. Territorial loss is then related to the occurrence of violence, and how shrinking control of urban terrain influences the level and intensity of violence.

Beyond a tangible loss of urban terrain, population-based wealth, resources, and operational space, ISIS is forced to reconstruct and adapt its narrative in line with conflict dynamics in Syria and Iraq. While the loss of cities will not immediately erode the group's legitimacy and authority, territorial control is a main ingredient to its existence, organizational ambitions, and the upending of its extremist rivals' conception of state-building. ISIS' political project also inspired a subset of recruits, sympathizers, and fighters. The chapter concludes with a discussion of visibility as double-edged sword for ISIS. While I demonstrate the utility of extending one's presence into urban terrain, establishing legitimacy, and monopolizing political



symbolism and violence, opponents also exploit ISIS' visibility to counter the group in both an armed and unarmed fashion.

### 3.1 Material Losses: Targets on the Map and Organizational Shocks



Choosing to govern urban terrain places ISIS' territory as a target on the map. The group amassed in major cities across Iraq and Syria, and its areas of influence and control are clearly marked. Indeed, the US-led anti ISIS coalition, regional militaries, government affiliated militias like the Popular Mobilization, and a plethora of local forces such as the YPG and FSA-affiliated groups have converged on ISIS urban terrain. While focusing on their own interests, even Russia and Turkey have pressured ISIS' cities in places like al-Bab and Palmyra. This dynamic likely renders ISIS' urban control as ephemeral at best. One would think the overwhelming firepower and capabilities of ISIS' international enemies would deter the group from occupying visible urban terrain, given the costs incurred. As Shapiro et. al et. al (2016) agrees, "when the Islamic State, or any similarly sized group, faces a highly competent military force, all the things it does to organize well become a vulnerability" (Summary, xx).

Despite this, the group has challenged traditional military literature throughout the sixteenth to the twentieth century, which regards urban warfare as costly. As Ashworth (1991)

states, military authorities once shared a mutual diversion to urban campaigns because of its potential for high casualties and unpredictability. It should come as no surprise that ISIS has bypassed conventional thinking. Its tactics drive enemies into urban terrain, rather than viewing urban terrain as a must-avoid nuisance or a costly venture. The group prefers to defend from dense urban territory, where it can maximize damage to coalition forces with asymmetric tactics including IEDs and deadly suicide car attacks that penetrate coalition frontlines. According to the *Institute for the Study of War*, ISIS is likely to withdraw a majority of its military assets from the Raqqa countryside as the impending battle for the city itself draws nearer.

While momentum frequently shifts both in the Syrian and Iraqi conflicts, Iraqi forces have regained most of the territory initially lost during ISIS' surge in 2014. Coalition efforts focus on retaking territory and recognize the importance of seizing ISIS' possessions as one step of the fight against the group. As a result, Syrian and Iraqi cities are the center of both insurgent and counterinsurgent strategy. Conventional forces and international campaigns are focused on the "defense implications" (Ashworth, 131) of urban terrain, including the types of training and forces needed to conduct fierce, often slow urban warfare. These forces often include what Ashworth coins "regular irregulars," (118) or commandos and special forces like Iraq's elite Counter Terrorism Service (CTS) that leads the offensive push in Mosul. In Syria and Iraq, the most intense engagements with the greatest implications for the future of each conflict occur in urban environments. Global attention and coalition efforts have shifted to and from various major population centers over the past few years. In January 2015, the international community witnessed one of the most destructive battles against ISIS unfold. Kurdish forces, with US assistance, repelled an overwhelming, four month ISIS siege begun in September of 2014 on the city of Kobane resting along the Turkish border. After initial Turkish resistance to aiding

Kurdish forces in Kobane, Ankara acquiesced and permitted heavily armed Peshmerga forces to reinforce their Syrian Kurdish partners, the People's Protection Units (YPG) holding on against ISIS. ISIS was officially expelled in January.

In November of 2015, Peshmerga forces liberated Sinjar, a significant city that garnered international attention after ISIS targeting of the area's Yazidi population in 2014. In March to April of 2015, the Popular Mobilization Forces pushed towards Tikrit, with the Iraqi military eventually completing the offensive and clearing operations with the support of US airstrikes. The next large offensives fell upon Ramadi and Fallujah from January to June of 2016. The current anti-ISIS policy as of January 2017 is focused on seizing the group's proudest possessions in Raqqa and Mosul. Another major offensive persists in northern Syria outside al-Bab, where Turkish-backed rebels are fighting to expel ISIS from the city. Even if offensives do not enter the city themselves, forces have pressured ISIS from outside, like in the ongoing stages of the Raqqa operation. While ISIS leadership navigates its territory carefully to avoid counter terrorism operations, ISIS' zones of influence are identifiable on a map. The group's adversaries thus focus most efforts on backing local forces who are on the frontline of winning back the territory ISIS once expelled them from.

### **3.2 - Territorial Loss and Violence**

Weinstein (2007) demonstrates that rebel and insurgent groups will face various shocks to their organizational structure that bring about "changing expectations" from both civilians and rebels over time (261). Territorial loss is one ISIS' most prominent organizational shocks. Fighting to defend its territory strains ISIS' ability to effectively allocate resources to governance as it shifts efforts towards defending the city, fighting, and losing manpower. When those

battlefields are predominantly urban terrain, the availability of certain “economic endowments” (Weinstein, 261) may also disappear.

Violence is also central to the discussion of territorial loss. Scholars conclude that the loss of territory compels a group to use higher levels of indiscriminate violence in a desperate effort to deter defections and civilian exodus into the arms of liberating forces (Wood, 2010; Weinstein, 2007). In line with this argument, as offensives against ISIS’ cities unfold, we can witness a greater use of human shields and executions in Mosul. Since Iraqi forces launched the long-awaited Mosul operation, ISIS has executed around 232 civilians while trapping many within the city to be used as human shields, according to the UN. ISIS has also used helicopter-style drones to drop grenades into civilian areas in Mosul and onto Iraqi soldiers moving further into the city. Civilians are also caught in the crossfire as they attempt to flee or remain. As Weinstein confirms, “. . . as rebel groups experience greater battlefield losses, they compensate by increasing their use of violence against civilians” (209). This increased targeting of civilians may also be an attempt to signal insurgent resolve, and its ability to inflict damage despite its battlefield losses (Weinstein, 2007). Hassan and Weiss (2015) share a similar approach to the relationship between territorial loss and violence: “Since the jihadists’ loss of crucial town and villages along the northern Syrian-Turkish border land, the dragnet on local dissidents has increased. The more land ISIS lost, the more its’ Murder Inc. pornography proliferated” (180). Overall, the group likely views those trapped as a cheap strategy to increase civilian casualties and disrupt coalition forces as they advance. Recognizing its eventual exit, ISIS no longer views civilians as those to win over, but rather as tools for their retreat and urban defense.

### 3.3 Ideational Losses: Land, the Caliphate and Legitimacy

There is also a legitimacy angle to the idea of being a target on the map. Territorial loss puts a dent in its claim to be a “caliphate.” In June of 2014 as the group made shocking advances, including on Iraq’s second largest city of Mosul, former Islamic State spokesman Abu Mohammad al-Adnani announced the establishment of the Caliphate (The following excerpt is a translation offered by *SITE Intelligence Group*)

*Here the flag of the Islamic State, the flag of tawhīd (monotheism), rises and flutters. Its shade covers land from Aleppo to Diyala. Beneath it, the walls of the tawāghīt (rulers claiming the rights of Allah) have been demolished, their flags have fallen, and their borders have been destroyed. Their soldiers are either killed, imprisoned, or defeated. The Muslims are honored. The kuffār (infidels) are disgraced. Ahlus-Sunnah (the Sunnis) are masters and are esteemed. The people of bid’ah (heresy) are humiliated. The hudūd (Sharia penalties) are implemented – the hudūd of Allah – all of them. The frontlines are defended.*

Adnani’s mention of ISIS’ border demonstrates that territorial control is a main ingredient to his declaration. The geographical, spatial significance also arises from the mention of frontlines, suggesting the group is defending its possessions and geographic regions. One of ISIS’ primary scholars, Turki ibn Mubarak al-Bin’ali, states that a historical requirement is “power, authority, and control of the territory” (McCants, 2015: 116). The group at the time of this proclamation swept up land stretching from “Mosul to the outskirts of Aleppo in Syria” (McCants, 120). Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi now called himself *caliph* of the Islamic State of Iraq

and the Levant, a title buried within history and last claimed by the Ottoman caliphate. *Caliph* in Arabic literally means “successor,” and signifies spiritual and political leadership over the Muslim community that descends from the Prophet Muhammad. One definition does not properly capture the term’s historical diversity. *Caliphs* have been described as representatives of God on Earth with unique divine authority while others have preferred to restrict the caliph’s authority to the “chief executive of the umma, the Muslim community, an ordinary human with worldly powers” (Kennedy, 2016). Al-Adnani underscores the diverse characteristics of the caliph’s responsibilities in the same audio message declaring the caliphate:

“[t]he Islamic State... resolved to announce the establishment of the Islamic caliphate, [and to appoint] a khalifa (caliph) for the Muslims: ... the sheikh, the mujahid, the scholar who practices what he preaches, the worshipper, the leader, the warrior, the reviver, descendent from the family of the Prophet” (SITE Intelligence Group, 2014).

As part of proving his legitimacy as *caliph*, Baghdadi sought to invoke imagery of the Prophet in a variety of manners, while underlining his unique position as caliph, or supposed ruler of all Muslims. In an unexpectedly public and prominent appearance at the Nuri Mosque in Mosul in June of 2014 following the declaration of the caliphate, Baghdadi donned a black robe and turban to underline his descent from the Prophet who wore similar attire when conquering Mecca. (McCants, 2015: 123). Further, al-Baghdadi traced his descent to the Prophet’s grandson, which is a “precursor set by many Islamic scholars for claiming legitimacy to rule Muslims” (Weiss and Hassan, 178). From these examples, Baghdadi shrouds himself in prophetic imagery

to embody his role as *caliph* and complement his claim to have restored an Islamic state in accordance with Prophet Muhammad.

Hassan and Weiss (2015) also discuss in detail ISIS' territorial control as of the many motivations for joining the group. Organizing the characteristics of those who join, they contend that *politikers*, those who are strict adherents to the group's "political project" and make up a "weighty percentage of its lower cadres and support base" (Hassan and Weiss, 2015: 168), see ISIS' territorial ambitions as a protector against perceived threats such as the Assad regime, Kurdish expansionism, and Shia militias. This is a popular explanation, one of disenfranchisement, former experiences under an oppressive government, and abuses from another actor fueling recruitment for groups like ISIS. It is important to analyze individuals who hold a worldview that places ISIS as a vanguard against perceived regional, existential, and sectarian threats to better understand how wartime considerations can push groups to ally with even the most extreme of partners. Another group, the *pragmatists* (Hassan and Weiss, 2015: 169), are attracted by ISIS' provision of services and seek to avoid causing trouble. Acting as free-riders, they prefer to live "where ISIS is said not to be committing atrocities" (170). Lastly, these two classifications closely relate to the *opportunists* (Hassan and Weiss, 2015: 170), who in many cases have left a rival Islamist group in Syria, hope to benefit from ISIS' territorial control, and want to "move up the chain of a dominant military and political force" (Hassan and Weiss, 2015: 170). From these examples, one can conclude that a subset of members who join the group have articulated their desire to contribute to the group's "distinctive governance model" (Hamid, 2016: 7), political ambitions and upending of regional state structures. Inspired by ISIS' political project, these individuals represent just one demographic among many for joining or sympathizing with the group, including religious and ideological explanations.

While ISIS will not disappear as an organization with its loss of territorial control, its narrative is weakened and the title *caliph* seems to lose its significance. ISIS is already dealing with shifting realities, and publicly and skillfully evaded conflict dynamics that contradict its own claims and eschatological prophecies before. When Turkish-backed opposition groups seized the symbolic city of Dabiq in northern Syria, the group had to explain why its impending, world-ending battle would have to wait. Dabiq plays a central role in the “End Times” prophecy. The original prophecy which derives from an ancient *hadith*, or saying of the Prophet, envisions that Muslim armies will confront the “Romans” in the fields of Dabiq, commencing the Day of Judgement. Jesus will return and fight alongside the Mahdi and Muslim armies against the “Christian” invaders. As the *BBC* reports, the Prophet Muhammad is believed to have said that "the last hour will not come" until Muslims vanquished the Romans at "Dabiq or al-Amaq" - both in the Syria-Turkey border region - on their way to conquer Constantinople (modern-day Istanbul).” Of course, this prophecy is reinterpreted to include today’s modern “Western” enemies. This is why ISIS fighters, followers, and fanboys publicly urged countries like the US to deploy large numbers of troops, in hopes they will invade Syria and have the opportunity to participate in the final, apocalyptic battle. As Weiss and Hassan (2015) agree, “the announcement in August 2014 of an international coalition to fight ISIS in Syria was hailed as a sign that the Islamic prophecy was nigh . . .” (171). After its expulsion from the village, ISIS responded the real battle had yet to come.

Similarly, as Iraqi forces converged on Mosul and began their push into the city’s neighborhoods in early October of 2015, ISIS publications quickly responded and defended against an overwhelming media focus on the group’s vulnerabilities. Taking attention away from offensives underway near Mosul and initial setbacks, the group’s official online newsletter, *al-*



*Naba*, quickly snapped back that the operation would be costly for the coalition and ISIS forced the Iraqi military to shift to defensive tactics (Winter, 2016). Likewise, well before the offensive, in May of 2016, Mohammad al-Adnani confronted the group's shrinking territory and emphasized the group's ability to endure while challenging, "Were we defeated when we lost the cities in Iraq and were in the desert without any city or land [during the US-led Iraqi war surge of 2007–2008]? And would we be defeated if you were to take Mosul, Sirte, or Raqqa? Certainly not! Defeat is the loss of will and desire to fight." Despite coalition airstrikes and military defeats, Adnani wanted his followers to be assured ISIS will live on to fight another day. Territorial loss will likely be reinterpreted as a momentary struggle on the path to renewed success. The caliph without a caliphate will urge his group to be patient. To him, they have lost another battle, but not the war. As Winter (2016) shares in *The Atlantic*, "By accommodating ideology to situational exigencies, the Islamic State passes the buck onto predestination and claims that all territorial losses, no matter how damaging, are necessary elements of God's caliphate project."

Weinstein (2016) emphasizes these messaging strategies as a fundamental aspect of how insurgent political powers articulate their recovery strategies to their followers. Leaders will "communicate important signals" about organizational responses and uses messaging to "reaffirm a group's orientation" (264). At the end of the day, the goal is to "minimize doubt and uncertainty. Consistency in message and coherence serve to minimize doubt and uncertainty" (264). Not matter how ISIS frames its losses and adaptations, some losses like in Mosul underline the structural weakness of taking major cities that governments and their international partners are destined to want back, sooner rather than later.

### 3.4 Visibility and Urban Terrain: ISIS Exposed

While ISIS' presence in cities compels adversaries to launch offensives to dislodge its control, another vulnerability of urban governance lies within the population itself. In cities like Raqqa and Mosul, sympathies for the group are unlikely to be the same across the board. By the nature of governance in civil war, it is difficult to manage the entirety of sympathies and loyalties in cities under a group's control. As is emphasized further in the following chapter, civilians are often presented as powerless, apathetic actors in civil war. This is far from the truth. Civilians possess a certain degree of agency to resist, support, or leave insurgent controlled areas. As Arjona (2015) explains, civilian opposition to rebel rule can take up two forms: *full resistance* or *partial resistance*. Full resistance "entails opposition to rebel rule altogether" while partial resistance includes opposition to a particular decisions or actions (181). *Partial resistance* is common in almost all cases of rebel governance, as civilians rarely agree with each and every rebel policy or move. *Full resistance* goes beyond a specific policy or action, thus carrying more costs for resisting legitimacy and insurgent power.

In the context of ISIS rule in urban terrain, these classifications of resistance can help us understand what type of resistance arises, its frequency, and the effects of ISIS governance on forms of resistance. Resistance is a quite encompassing term, and describes anything from "expressive" acts of opposition to more outright signs of disobedience. (Arjona, 2015: 183) Resistance may also be peaceful in nature or violent, and conducted surreptitiously or overtly. Lastly, resistance can involve larger groups with higher levels of organization or leaderless movements and individuals (Arjona, 2015: 184). These two types of resistance are both present in ISIS territory. In regards to partial resistance, civilians can lobby official complaints to ISIS' courts that are limited to specific ISIS policy, such as its market controls, taxation, and arrests of

family or a respected community member. Simultaneously, individuals and groups alike may decide to challenge the group's grip on power more directly, whether that be with arms or opposing their narratives and ideology.

ISIS governance falls under the category of *rebelocracy*, which refers to governance that intervenes in and regulates most realms of daily life as compared to *aliocracy*, where rebel governors outsource most governance activities to local actors while primarily ensuring security. (Arjona, 182). Thus, ISIS' interventionist style of ruling in its cities has likely affected the production of resistance, especially in regards to pushing resistance underground. The group's coercive measures and punishments that raise the costs of resistance deter the average civilian from fully resisting in an open manner. Therefore, most resistance is probably carried out via clandestine means in the shadows of ISIS-controlled cities. This type of resistance is also conducive to city environments. ISIS' visibility and interventionist style exposes the group to opposition that locates ISIS fighters and affiliated targets within the city. For example, secret groups like the "Mosul Brigades" use some of ISIS' tactics against them, launching attacks on checkpoints and targeting fighters in their homes. As reported by Joanna Paraszczuk of *Radio Free Iraq*, these resistance fighters have even carried out targeted assassinations. In Libya, local media reports surfaced of a sniper harassing ISIS fighters while they roamed the city. This "mystery marksmen" was credited with killing three commanders in the city.

While the most overt forms of opposition against ISIS are carried out by means of armed confrontation by a state's military, associated militia, or opposition group, not all opposition to ISIS has taken up arms. Some have risked their lives to document the reality of living under ISIS-held territory and would fall under Arjona's (2015) definition of full resistors operating in a concealed manner, primarily for personal safety. The group's visibility provides opportunities for

underground activist networks to surreptitiously film ISIS fighters patrolling the streets and carrying out punishments and abuses. While this type of opposition is passive and does not pose a military threat to the group's control of its urban terrain, counter information can reveal oppressive behaviors exhibited by the group, help policymakers and analysts better understand its governance methods, and offer hard evidence for testimonies to international organizations. ISIS has committed resources to breaking down networks such as *Raqqa is Being Slaughtered Silently* (RBSS), an underground network of journalists or "truth-tellers" (Remnick, 2015) in Raqqa who began secretly documenting ISIS' abuses and governance shortly after the group took over the city. A *BBC* documentary titled "Islamic State's Most Wanted," sheds further light on these journalists, their methods of filming ISIS and smuggling evidence abroad, and ISIS' sophisticated attempts to silence them.

ISIS pursues the group both inside and outside of Syria using a variety of methods. Early on, for instance, ISIS devised a clever plan to expose potential opponents. After expelling rivals from Raqqa, ISIS called for a public gathering to discuss general governance matters and concerns. This was a deceptively friendly gathering. Fighters left their weapons outside, shook civilians' hands, and allowed them to speak up and discuss concerns. According to the activists who spoke in the documentary, an ISIS member photographed everyone present. At the end of the event, those who spoke were shot and others forced to swear allegiance to remain in Raqqa. ISIS also exploits the vulnerabilities of RBSS members, such as a family member. For instance, a member of the underground network, Hamoud, related a chilling story of how ISIS kidnapped his father to be used as leverage. His father was displayed on camera, begging his son to come forward if he wanted his life to be spared. The ISIS fighter who contacted Hamoud requested he give the names of all RBSS correspondents in Raqqa or his father would be killed. Vowing to

remain firm and not give into ISIS' threats, Hamoud refused, saying his father would not be the "first or last to die in this conflict." The group eventually filmed the father's execution and posted the video online. Additionally, an RBSS member, Moutaz, was stopped at a checkpoint on the way from Raqqa to Turkey. After seizing his camera and computer, ISIS discovered details of the organization, including photos and the group's logo. A few days after his arrest, ISIS executed Moutaz in a public square in Tel Abayd.

In another illustration of the group's commitment to crackdown on these activists, ISIS utilized a long-term friendship to gain the trust of an RBSS member. Once loyal to ISIS, the individual reunited with his friend in Turkey and assassinated him in his apartment with a knife. In late October 2015, ISIS shot dead two RBSS members, Fares Hammadi and Ibrahim Abd al-Qader in the Turkish city of Sanliurfa (Weiss and Hassan, 2015: 180). In Raqqa itself, according to the activists, ISIS extracted intelligence from civilians willing to cooperate and provide information about individuals involved in RBSS, and attempted to dismantle the network by posting "wanted" signs and coercing members to speak out. Those who paid the price of resisting the group inside Raqqa include Bashir Abduladhim al-Saado and Faisal Hussain al-Habib. These two were shown in an ISIS video in typical orange jump suits confessing to spying charges. ISIS filmed their deaths as they were tied to a wooden post and shot in the head. This was an ominous message to all RBSS members viewing the film circulating online, and confirmed ISIS' determination to root out the network's members.

Military opposition is a vital aspect of countering ISIS, yet the information war must not be forgotten. As Abdelaziz told the *BBC*, "It's another war, another fight. We could not carry weapons. We are not the people with the weapons as the solution . . . When they show everything in Raqqa is paradise, everything is okay, we showed the reality." Groups like RBSS

play an integral part in this effort and provide a window into the heart of the caliphate while engaging ISIS on the “digital battlefield” (Remnick, 2015). Their first-hand view of ISIS’ oppression and coercion is key to countering the group’s claims and reinforcing a counter-reality.

### **3.5 Conclusion**

Urban governance is a weakness for ISIS despite the short-term benefits. Vulnerabilities in urban terrain come from both populations inside cities and international actors pressuring from outside. ISIS faces multiple campaigns against its cities and the loss of resources and territory. In the ideational realm, ISIS must also alter its messaging strategy as its organizational structure suffers defeats. Territory is directly tied to the question of legitimacy, especially since ISIS’ seizure of land enabled Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi’s unilateral declaration of an Islamic caliphate.

Further, ISIS’ interventionist presence and visibility in its urban territory shapes the type of resistance. Resistance will inevitably arise against insurgent governance, whether on a full-scale or partial basis. In cities such as Raqqa and Mosul, opposition has taken the form of covert networks of activists and individuals seeking to operate beneath ISIS’ monitoring apparatus. The group is identified not only on the map by its enemies, but also internally through its interventionist governing style. This same exposure and visibility that aids the group in indoctrination and the construction of authority also serves as an outlet for more clandestine forms of resistance, be they armed or not, to target and monitor the group.

## CHAPTER 4: Maintaining Rulership: Violence, Tribal Politics, and Civilian Choices

### Introduction:

Many authors have identified civilians as strategic actors with the agency to impact rebel insurgent governance. Weinstein (2007) observed, “Civilians are strategic actors, and as such they have the capacity to provide or withhold their participation and support” (163) and “are in a position of power . . . to offer information to combatants” (203). Similarly, Arjona (2015) has stated that civilians “may offer an armed group their support voluntarily, passively obey its demands, oppose it, or flee” (181). Mampilly (2011) shares the same view: “Whether adopting the exit option by fleeing a rebel-held territory or engaging in violent or nonviolent challenges to the insurgent political regime, civilians have considerable latitude in determining their relationship with a violent group” (234). This view can be lost in global coverage of today's conflicts, which often focuses on one side of rebel-civilian interactions: how ISIS pressures populations. The word *population* has become an all-encompassing one, with little investigation to explicate the various choices before civilians in the face of rebel or insurgent rule. This chapter breaks down populations into categories: *civilians* generally refers to those residing in ISIS cities while *tribal entities* are a more specific subset of civilians.

This chapter first outlines prominent choices civilians face under ISIS, in addition to the factors that influence loyalties, complacency, or direct opposition against the group. I then address tribal politics, which are intricately tied to ISIS' presence and movement across Syria and Iraq. Akin to civilian populations, there are complex reasons tribes join or oppose ISIS. Civilian and tribal dynamics are rarely black and white. Next, I investigate how ISIS utilizes coercive governance measures to influence the choices and behavior of civilians and enforce consent. In these discussions, I look at the relationship between urban space and violence,

specifically how city space serves ISIS' visible punishments agenda. I also explain the various purposes of ISIS violence, including violence as a form of advertisement or recruitment and a means of deterring defection. I build off other scholars (Zelin, 2016; Hassan and Weiss, 2015) who inject chronological dimensions to the study of ISIS violence in relation to its consolidation of power, especially the gradual growth of violence's intensity. I locate another feature of ISIS violence, namely its executions of rival troops and sympathizers upon arrival. These killings seek to emphasize a shift in control and successful defeat of an adversary. Together, these discussions identify prominent characteristics of ISIS violence to better understand how it functions, serves organizational goals, and develops over time and space in its cities through Iraq, Syria, and beyond.

#### **4.1 – Civilian and Tribal Agency**

##### **I. The Three Options**

Hirschman's (1970) modeling of *exit, voice, and loyalty (EVL)* provides beneficial analysis for the choices of civilians in the face of new insurgent forces entering their areas. Using the context of business models, Hirschman (1970) originally outlined the factors that cause employees to remain loyal, express dissent, or choose to leave all together during decline in a business' organizational structure or performance. EVL modeling is applied by various scholars outside of the original business firm context. For instance, Clark, Golder and Golder (2006) extract Hirschman's modeling to analyze civilian to state relations, specifically the "role of power in the relationship between states and their citizens," and democratic transitions. While these choices could arise at less unstable times after an insurgent group cements its political presence and power into an urban environment, the most immediate effects will take place at the



onset of a “deleterious change in their environment” (Clark, Golder and Golder, 2006). Scholars and authors have yet to reinterpret EVL modeling for ISIS political structures. Here, my goal is to identify the entrance or exit of ISIS from a city as a major influence for civilian preferences, while examining the safest options for civilians living in ISIS-controlled cities.

First, *voice* remains very unlikely under ISIS due to the threat of immediate rebuke and punishment. When *voice* is elected, it is likely to be private amongst clandestine opposition groups, or done without attribution, such as with anti-ISIS graffiti. As Clark, Golder and Golder (2006) agree, “the degree of state repression will also affect the citizen’s cost of using voice” (6). Little can be accomplished by speaking out, except on a small basis when limited to particular grievances or regulations imposed by the group. This type of voice differs from voice directly opposing ISIS’ political power or legitimacy. Overall, voice will bring unwanted attention upon civilians in ISIS cities. Citizens are more willing to deploy voice and express grievances with insurgents if the political structure incorporates civilian demands and shares power.

Similar to the levels of intervention varying by city, ISIS’ desire to respond to civilian voice may also be subject to contextual factors. The group seeks to settle disputes and portray itself as a reliable arbiter in legal issues, especially early on when trying to distinguish itself from other groups, like in Minbij (Hassan and Weiss, 2015). As Zelin (2015) agrees, “Bringing speedy justice to the public and dealing with longstanding issues to show it can get things done efficiently is crucial to maintaining legitimacy for IS,” (3) especially in its pre-territorial control phase. Response to civilian voice may then be tied to the level of control exerted over a territory. For instance, it is possible where ISIS’ presence is less secure or not as widespread, the group has less incentive to respond, while in more important cities, its greater commitment to governing and frequent interactions with populations creates more opportunities. Even when

ISIS responds to civilian grievance, it is not certain whether this reflects long-term behavior and consistency in answering demands for the sake of civilians.

Moreover, Clark, Golder and Golder (2006) introduce a concept of dependent and autonomous states. Dependent states are defined as those who rely on citizens' support, and are motivated to respond to civilian voice to prevent exit, maintain loyalty, and ensure economic investment or political support. Autonomous states are shielded from civilian dependence, and often ignore civilian voice without consequences. These state structures are more concerned with the benefits taken from citizens rather than potential losses. Related to EVL modeling, insurgents and civilians do not necessarily need to maintain positive relations to get what they want. Insurgents that are more autonomous from populations will likely ignore demands and the expression of voice. Clark, Golder and Golder (2006) explain that under certain circumstances states prefer to respond when a citizen exercises voice to avoid the consequences of lost loyalty. For example, a citizen's *credible exit* threat, one form of voice, may push a state to respond. Hirschman notes that this type of voice is "uniquely powerful . . . by inflicting revenue losses on delinquent management" (1970, 21). However, these assumptions of a state's willingness to respond do not always hold true under ISIS' political structures. In Clark, Golder and Golder's (2006) model, a state's response to voice or the threat of potential exit is positive in nature, as it seeks address a grievance in favor of its citizens. ISIS' response though is most often to expose and punish the expression of voice, rather than placate opposition and incorporate concerns.

Next, *loyalty* has two possible levels, *complete* or *apathetic*. *Complete* involves passionate loyalists whose commitment is not swayed by conflict dynamics. For *apathetic* civilians, loyalty is influenced by factors such as weakening insurgent rule, especially for those who view ISIS as a short-term partner, and the opportunity to collaborate with governments.

Wood (2010) focuses on loyalty in relation to conflict dynamics, arguing, “Civilians' subjective assessment of the likely outcome of the conflict represents an additional factor in determining loyalty and support. Civilians prefer to back a winner, largely because of the fear of retribution should they support the loser and because with victory comes the credible promise of benefits” (Clark, Golder and Golder, 2006: 10). Further, territorial control also influences the level or type of loyalty. Loyalty in the form of overt support is more likely to arise when rebels or insurgents “have relatively secure control of the region” (Clark, Golder and Golder, 2006: 75). If fleeing from ISIS territory is not a plausible option, loyalty, whether passionate or apathetic, is the safest strategy for civilians in ISIS territory.

For those who view ISIS as a temporary governor, the choice is often to ensure survival until the group is expelled or moves on. Loyalty can also be interpreted as a weakness: “In effect, it is the decision to demonstrate loyalty, rather than the use of voice that signals a lack of power . . .” (Clark, Golder and Golder, 2006: 16). In other words, they are powerless to pursue the other two strategies of *voice* or *exit* (Clark, Golder and Golder, 2006: 12) due to ISIS’ constraints, particularly its control of access points in and out of the city and low tolerance for dissent. This underlines the reality that not all loyalty to ISIS is entirely sincere, and can be a forced option due to limited voice or the inability to exit territory. In the words of Kasfir (2015), “Coercion may account for civilian participation governance more accurately than portrayals of popular enthusiasm” (35). In these situations, civilians are “sitting ducks,” unable to exit, express dissent, or improve their prospects. ISIS takes away the “citizen’s benefits and there is nothing the citizen can do about it but accept the new state of affairs” (Clark, Golder and Golder, 2006: 10).

Lastly, *exit* under ISIS control may take on two forms: voluntary or forced displacement. Exit does not require that an individual is a member of ISIS. In this context, exit focuses on those

civilians who depart ISIS- controlled territory, in addition to members who defect or collaborate with a rival. The *exit by fleeing* strategy is pursued for those who want to avoid living under ISIS control, however, even after fleeing they face new challenges, including scrutiny by liberating forces or migration to pro-government held areas with their own dangers. Fluctuation of control is extremely perilous for civilians who are targeted by insurgents, questioned by rival or pro-government forces, and caught in the crossfire. For instance, in Mosul, ISIS frequently targeted families as they attempted to leave. Human shields are a common strategy, and civilians find themselves stuck in active battle zones or coerced by ISIS to remain. Therefore, exit by fleeing is not always an option, even when a group's control diminishes.

## **II. The Complexity of Tribal Agency**

The discussion above touches upon populations within ISIS' cities and the choices they can make when the group parades into new urban terrain or is kicked out. A more specific portion of this population is the numerous tribal groups ISIS interacts with. Syrian and Iraqi tribes are not confined to the desert regions, and exist in and around major urban centers. For instance, in Syria, Arab tribes<sup>3</sup> make up 30 percent of Syria's population and inhabit 60 percent of the territory, including in cities where ISIS has taken over. In cities such as Deir Ezzor, Hasaka, Raqqa, and Deraa, members of the tribes are more heavily concentrated (Hassan and Weiss, 2015: 188). Throughout the history of the region, Arab tribes have confronted many challenges, with ISIS being the most recent actor to test tribal structure and ties. Especially in Iraq and Syria, the Assad and Saddam regimes approached tribes as both partners and rivals,

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<sup>3</sup> Tribe refers to unit of organization in society. Members are connected by familial, ancestral ties often occupying a specific region or area of a country. In the Middle East, tribal names descend from a common person or figure in the history of the group. Tribal members often participate in regional governments, and have been both sources of opposition, co-optation, and support for Arab regimes seeking to boost their support base or alienate rivals.

looking to some as a source of support and a bulwark against rivals, while dealing with others as opposition. In Syria, for instance, Hafez and Bashar al-Assad both maintained ties to Arab tribes in northern, southern, and eastern Syria for political support and as a counterweight to Kurdish and Islamist ambitions (Dukhan, 2015). ISIS understands the necessity of dealing with these tribes to ensure success, especially since areas under their control come across these populations. Analyzing tribal politics is an effective medium to observe how ISIS allies with or marginalizes those in its path. For instance, one method ISIS uses is a “divide-and-rule strategy” (McCants, 2015; Hassan and Weiss, 2015) to manage and manipulate tribal relations and tensions.

This divide and rule strategy focuses on pitting members of the same tribes against each other. For instance, in 2014 in the city of Deir Ezzor, members of the Shaitat tribe executed hundreds of their own, “at ISIS’ behest” (Hassan and Weiss, 2015: 190). Hassan (2014) comments that in Syria, “Isis is the first fighting faction to successfully pit tribes and members of a tribe against each other.” This strategy also includes installing younger tribal leaders who were more active in the uprising against Assad while alienating older members. ISIS seeks out these younger, influential tribal leaders at the expense of their elders, which has in turn created local tensions and rivalries with members who are unwilling to join the group or pledge allegiance. Moreover, ISIS attempts to financially sway tribal allegiances and offer incentives to those who cooperate (Hassan, 2014; McCants, 2015). As Hassan and Weiss (2015) relate, “ISIS secretly sought to co-opt young tribal leaders by offering to share oil and smuggling revenues . . . It also promised them positions of authority held by their elders” (190).

Tribes that cooperate with ISIS have done so for numerous reasons. Some want to ensure their group’s short-term survival or gain the trust of ISIS, the new power brokers in their areas. Others cannot resist the financial rewards and incentives, the potential to have their status

elevated above other local leaders and elements, or to “present themselves as leaders to push for their personal interests” (192). Pledging allegiance to ISIS also enables tribes to alienate rivals. It is hard to discount opportunism as well, and the desire to play a role in ISIS’ momentum rather than confront the group and risk being targeted now and in the future (McCants, 2015). It is important to note, as Hassan and Weiss (2015) do, that “ISIS’ tribal exploitation does have limitations” (192). One must consider situations where tribal divides and conflicts spiral out of control and require ISIS’ attention to resolve them. ISIS could also become the target of tribes when the honeymoon of convenience fades away.

Allegiance and cooperation is not the entirety of the story, as ISIS also employs coercion against the tribes. As Hassan (2016), notes, the Jaghayfa tribe resisted a two-year ISIS siege against the Iraqi city of Haditha. ISIS executed around 200 fighters of the Albu Nimr tribe and dumped their bodies into a mass-grave during the fall of 2014. A tribal elder of the Albu Nimr, Sheikh Naeem al-Gaoud, reported to the *BBC* that after fleeing Ramadi to the village of Khanizir, ISIS rounded up and shot 70 members in the fall of 2015. Members of the Shaitat tribe in eastern Syria, discussed above, suffered a similar after an attempted uprising in the town of Abu Hamam, per the *Washington Post*. ISIS used brutal methods such “beheadings, mass shootings, and crucifixions” (Sly, 2015), and after three days of violence, nearly 700 people had died. Men and boys “older than fifteen were summarily killed” (Hassan and Weiss, 263) once ISIS took over the town.

When other tribes look to these events as reference points for what happens if you resist, it becomes clear why some may reconsider full opposition and prioritize the short-term survival of their members and community. Other factors deterring resistance include a perceived lack of support from a central government, the desire to use ISIS to take on rivals, or the belief, like the

*politikers* in Chapter 3, that other actors in society pose a larger threat to a tribe's existence. Along these lines, McCants (2015) reveals, "In dealing with the Sunni tribes, the State [ISIS], benefited a great deal from the tribes' anger towards the central governments in Damascus and Baghdad" (152). Therefore, the decision on whether to support a group like ISIS can be influenced by a multitude of factors. Policies to provide greater support to tribes in the fight against ISIS must consider this complex, historical context. ISIS' emergence in eastern Syria and Anbar province in western Iraq forces these tribes to assess the potential benefits or pitfalls of allying with ISIS.

### **III. Territorial Control and Shifting Loyalties**

When determining the factors that can influence a shift in civilian loyalties, it is important to look at territorial loss. A question that arises is whether civilians link rebellion and overt opposition to conflict dynamics. The contestation of territory or its loss to international campaigns may enable opposition to arise that would otherwise remain unexpressed or underground. I build off Wood (2010), who also analyzes the relationship between control, violence, and civilian loyalties, and apply these concepts to civilians under ISIS rule. When insurgents face challenges or their control fluctuates, civilians view this as an opportunity to take advantage of a weakness or shift their loyalty elsewhere. In the context of Mosul and Raqqa, and many of the other cities retaken from ISIS, the prospect of liberation may influence the emergence of civilian opposition. Indeed, Wood (2010) agrees that when insurgents face "battlefield setbacks, when foreign powers intervene on the behalf of the government, or when other factors cause a decline in the insurgents' relative capabilities, civilians become more likely to defect and support the government" (11).

A prime example of this dynamic comes from Mosul. According to a report from *Reuters*, the city's underground resistance, Mosul Brigades, planned an uprising against the group with the arrival of the Iraqi military into Mosul's neighborhoods. At the start of coalition operations in Mosul, ISIS drowned 58 people reportedly involved in this plot to disrupt ISIS defenses as Iraqi forces approached. In this instance, while information is limited, it would indicate that with the eventual decline of the group in one of its major urban hubs, resistance groups sought to take advantage and place additional pressure on ISIS defenses. Additionally, the *Institute for the Study of War* stated in its report from late October that as the Iraqi Army (IA) recaptured al-Hawd and al-Lazakah, "civilians in al-Hawd had reportedly already risen up and killed many of the ISIS militants before the ISF arrived." Civilians capitalized on the impending decline of the group, and assisted government forces in clearing the area. Territorial loss, loyalty, and violence interact in compelling ways. In the context of anti-ISIS operations, the contestation of urban terrain could represent a catalyst for shifting loyalties.

## **4.2 - Coercive Rule**

### **I. Visible Violence and Urban Environments**

Coercion and brutal violence stand out among ISIS' governance tools. Images flash across our screens of the group's gory execution videos. Beheadings of James Foley, David Haines, Peter Kassig, Alan Henning and Steven Sotloff drew attention to the group's extreme violence, which has served both recruitment and political purposes (Zach and Kelly, 2014). Here, however, I focus on violence within its cities against civilians and how urban space offers ISIS a stage on which it can play out its executions. The group has turned criminal punishments and executions into a spectacle that serves strategic purposes and sends a message to its populations.



Urban environments and the organization of space are conducive to ISIS' use of violence, especially in rallying crowds to witness, enforcing compliance, openly committing atrocities, and socializing populations.

First, ISIS focuses its punishments on city centers, thus its violence may be characterized as a form advertisement for the movement and its capabilities. The highly-publicized nature of its violence is also an attempt to show "resolve," after coalition successes and offensives (Kalyvas, 2014). Deterring defection is another strategic purpose of ISIS violence. This strategy demonstrates the grave consequences of opposition, and seeks to shape behavior and civilian loyalties. Defection, what Berman (2009) labels the *achilles heel* of radical religious groups, is especially relevant here due to the sensitive nature of information shared with one's rival. Through violence and the use of threats, ISIS can "raise the costs of defection to individuals that care more about survival" (Kalyvas, 2016: 203) and prevent damaging collaboration with rivals. In addition, ISIS violence is a means of achieving consent through enforcement, or as Kalyvas (2006) argues, to *enforce* popular support. Zack and Kelly (2014) agree that ISIS' choice to spread images and videos of its beheadings is designed to communicate "the consequences of resistance" (85), and even serves as a recruiting tool that eliminates "moderates" and attracts hardliners (Zach and Kelly, 2014: 86).

Executions, tying victims to posts and fences with a crime label, and crucifixions are tactics frequently used by ISIS to ensure civilians understand these *consequences* of resistance. ISIS has executed a wide range of victims in public fashion, most prominently those it considers *murtad* (apostates), *rafidhah* (heretic), *kufar* (unbelievers), alleged criminals, spies, and political or military rivals. In Sirte, Libya, for example, ISIS crucified an alleged spy with a sign that read جاسوس (spy) above his head (Zelin, 2015: 9). Bodies are often hung in public or left in the streets

after an execution with these messages prominently displaying the crime. Abu Ibrahim, a member of RBSS who witnessed a series of crucifixions in Raqqa in April 2014, reported the accused were shot in the head, crucified, and placed in a Raqqa roundabout. In *Wilayat* (state) *Tarabulus* (Tripoli), ISIS beheaded a man advertised as a “sorcerer” in front of a crowd in a park. An ISIS video from December 2015 titled “And the Magician Will Not Succeed Wherever He Is” broadcasts this man’s death, along with various other punishments. Behind the ISIS members, a large crowd watches as they first lash a man for drinking wine and fornication. Soon after, the “sorcerer” arrives to the scene, is ushered past the crowd, and forced to kneel before an ISIS fighter as he lowers the sword. Another video displaying the execution of civilians comes from *Wilayat Diljah*, an ISIS occupied region in Iraq near the Tigris River and south of Mosul. The video, titled “Liquidation of a Group from the Apostate Rejectionist Committees,” presents three men accused of apostasy -- rejection of God and one’s Muslim faith -- in typical orange ISIS jumpsuits. After they individually confess their “crimes,” ISIS takes the men to a main roundabout in the city, interrupting traffic to escort them to the center of the intersection. As a crowd gathers and traffic forms, ISIS carries out the execution. Members of RBSS discovered by ISIS, the underground activist network in Raqqa, are victims of ISIS’ gory execution videos as well. Hassan and Weiss (2015) describe how one of the group’s founding members, Motaaz, “was captured by ISIS and executed in a public square by being thrown off a high building” (180). Further, Bashir Abdulahdim al-Saado and Faisal Hussain al Habib, who also worked the RBSS, were forced to confess for spying on ISIS. Their fate is similar to others accused of spying. ISIS tied them to wooden posts and shot them in the head at point-black range.

The group’s violence is both indiscriminate and selective. With sufficient information, ISIS targets specific members of resistance networks like RBSS and Mosul Brigades, or

individuals associated with governments, past and present uprisings, and accused of spying on behalf of the coalition. This demonstrates that ISIS frequently goes after “rival elites and ideological foes” (Burke, 2016), or in other words, those who stand in the way of implementing its goals and consolidating power. Kalyvas (2016) reminds us that these strategies of selectively targeting enemy collaborators and those associated with enemy governments and militaries is a “common tactic employed by both insurgents and governments in civil war contexts” across space and time. For all its religious, ideological, and political characteristics, ISIS shares a violent history with insurgents of the past for these targeting habits.

The group’s violence goes beyond the targeting of enemy collaborators and rivals. In a more indiscriminate manner, ISIS has targeted large numbers of civilians without differentiation between conspirators or the innocent. As Kalyvas (2003) writes, “this is a type of violence whereby the victims are selected based on their membership in some group and irrespective of their individual actions” (98). In the context of decreasing territorial control, the group resorts to civilian shields and targeting those fleeing. Individuals associated with other religious sects are also indiscriminately killed, not for actions, but due to relation to a community, sect, or group. McCants accurately concludes that ISIS “revels in its gore” (148) and goes “the extra mile with its punishments” (137). ISIS exploits city layouts and space to plan its executions and maximize visibility. These are not simple events, but include planned scripts ISIS fighters read from, speaker systems to project its exclamations, and the attraction of crowds. In essence, the group turns punishments and executions into a spectacle that serves strategic purposes, with the city providing suitable terrain to maximize visibility.

## **II. Violence Upon Arrival**

ISIS' violence and gore is also timely. For instance, as Zech and Kelly demonstrate (2014), "After overtaking the Syrian 17th division outside Raqqa, IS displayed soldiers' decapitated bodies and mounted more than fifty severed heads on fence posts." This was an effort to underline its arrival and emphasize the new shift in control. Similarly, in 2014 outside of Tikrit during the group's initial wave of momentum, ISIS captured Iraqi military recruits and recorded their brutal execution. All were shot and dumped in pre-dug mass graves. The *BBC* estimates that approximately 1,700 soldiers were killed. This incident, known as the "Camp Speicher Massacre," became a rallying cry for those fighting the group. Malik and Khalili et al. (2015) revealed that as ISIS seized towns along the Turkish-Syrian border, the group "kidnapped high-level commanders from other rebel groups, and murdered Syrian civilians who had been involved in the earliest mass protests against Assad, calculating that these were the only people brave enough to confront Isis in the future." The group seeks to eliminate immediate threats and preempt resistance, in addition to determining the makeup of its population to reduce potential troublemakers. Indeed, ISIS' violence has even forced certain civilians to leave an area, only to replace their departure with sympathizers and fighters. Bristol (2015) analyzes this "instrumental use of violence" as a means of "encouraging the *hijrah* (migration) of loyalists and expelling dissidents, whose abandoned property is given to new immigrants." ISIS' violence upon arrival plays a key role in population control, rooting out civilian opposition that impedes its political goals, introducing the costs of opposition, and punishing those who confront its' entrance or collaborated in the past.

### **III. The Growth of Violence in ISIS Territory**

McCants (2015) characterizes the increase in ISIS' violence and extreme punishment as gradual process related to their level of control. The group initially seeks to build good will with the population as it cracks down on crime and regulates "public morality" (McCants, 2015). Others also locate this soft approach in the "pre-territorial" stage of ISIS territorial consolidation, while the group focuses on its *dawa* activities, socializing the population, and introducing its governance and regulations (Zelin, 2014). ISIS' early presence is even characterized as "gentle" treatment (Hassan and Weiss, 200). Caris and Reynolds (2014) concur with this analysis and observe that ISIS begins with less controversial means only to give way to stricter governance habits. They establish "outreach centers and rudimentary court systems first because these are less resource-intensive and less controversial among the Syrian population" (4).

As ISIS further entrenches itself into urban environments, however, punishments become more swift and severe. Capturing the nature of this shift, McCants (2015) writes, "While this proselytism is mere outreach and advice at first—civilians are politely encouraged to stop smoking and drinking—it later becomes coercive and violent with the introduction of corporal punishments for anyone caught selling or consuming cigarettes or alcohol." Zelin (2014) also explains that ISIS carries out more severe judicial punishments once full control is established. These include: "whippings, tying people to lampposts or fences with signs naming their misdeeds . . . caging individuals, cutting off hands, stoning, point-black shootings, beheadings, and crucifixion" (4). Therefore, as ISIS increases its control, so too does the intensity and frequency of its violence.

Not all jihadist groups agree with ISIS' level of violence against civilians. This is one of the many divergences from al-Qaida, who is more careful to avoid alienating populations in its midst. While violence has undoubtedly served as a tool for al-Qaida before, Jabhat Fatah al-

Sham (JFS) (formerly Jabhat al-Nusra), the group's branch in Syria, seeks to integrate, embed, and expand its influence within Syrian revolution dynamics gradually. One of its most prominent efforts is to make itself an indispensable, invaluable battlefield partner against the Assad regime. As Charles Lister (2015) informs us in his report from *Foreign Policy*, "Whereas the Islamic State has imposed unilateral control over populations and rapidly proclaimed independence, al-Qaida's Syrian affiliate has moved much more deliberately, seeking to build influence in the areas they hope to rule." Nusra's supposed break from al-Qaida during the summer of 2016 ties into this strategy, as the symbolic move is likely designed to give the impression of being on the side of the Syrian people. Local resistance to Zarqawi's al-Qaida in Iraq served as a reminder of the pitfalls of alienating and terrorizing populations. Bin Laden and Zawahiri took notice. Zawahiri, writing to Zarqawi in 2005 warned, "we shouldn't stir questions in the hearts and minds of the people about the benefit of our actions . . ." (McCants, 2015: 144).

Therefore, ISIS and al-Qaida differ on their strategic approach to garnering popular support and the use of violence, in addition to the correct path towards reaching their shared end goal: establishing an Islamic state. ISIS' risky strategy has made enemies at every corner. It is more willing to deploy coercive, violent measures to enforce support and submission while raising the costs of opposition, while al-Qaida is more cautious in interacting with populations and pursues a gradual approach to laying the foundation for an Islamic state. To ISIS, liberation and the seizure of territory come first (Hassan and Weiss, 2015), and coercion and violence are methods of achieving political control and arousing the masses.

### **4.3 Conclusion**

This chapter seeks to bring civilian agency under insurgent political structures to the forefront. I delve into the various factors driving these certain actors to back, withhold support, or resist the Islamic State. Adapting Hirschman's *exit, voice, loyalty* model to the context of ISIS is beneficial in examining how civilians react to the rise or fall of the group in urban environments. For instance, as shown, civilian loyalty is likely affected by territorial loss and the declining prospects of the group. Mosul operations are already demonstrating these principles, albeit on a small scale. *Exit* and *voice* are shown to be dangerous paths to elect under ISIS rule. *Exit* prior to the group's arrival is preferred, however once the group seizes a city, its control of access points and scrutiny of anyone entering or exiting creates many risks for those attempting to sneak out. Due to ISIS' interventionist governance methods and brutal repression of *voice*, civilians may prefer to pursue apathetic acceptance of the group's presence or be "pushed into total passivity and political abdication," (Kalyvas, 2003: 104) while confining complaints to specific policies rather than ISIS' legitimacy.

Further, ISIS' violence has many trends and serves a variety of purposes. It can be a recruiting technique, a form of advertisement, a method of provocation, and a signal of resolve. It is usually carried out in visible settings amidst routine city life, and the group exploits the spatial utility of urban environments to maximize violence's effect. It is an effective deterrent for opposition that causes civilians to think twice about using voice or exit, and a signaling mechanism that demonstrates the consequences of resistance. Kalyvas (2003) articulates this strategy as a tool "aiming to generate compliance via deterrence" (102). In relation to territorial control, the level of violence used to punish crimes and dissent gradually increases in intensity and severity as the group consolidates its hold. Thus, the group switches from a soft to hard approach after its introduction phase passes. ISIS initially responds to public complaints, cracks

down on crime to win favor, and prosecutes through its court systems. Yet these actions are an attempt to look competent and create illusion of transparency while masking a much darker reality ahead.

The type of violence shifts in line with the group's territorial control as well, specifically towards indiscriminate targeting that disrupts its adversaries' advances using human shields. Its violence is timely in that it seeks to emphasize a shift in control by immediately parading and killing government troops, and swiftly punishing those who fought the group before its takeover. Like many other insurgent and rebel groups, ISIS deploys both selective and indiscriminate strategies. It targets specific individuals associated with resistance networks and governments, or suspected collaborators and spies, while also targeting civilians without differentiation between offenders and the innocent. In the end, ISIS violence is multilayered and serves multiple strategic purposes. Just like the group's territorial consolidation, there are several trends in how violence is organized and utilized across its territory.



## CHAPTER 5: Temporary Governor but Long-Term Threat

### Introduction:

This final chapter presents the Islamic State’s urban governance strategies as one dimension of a larger existence. Its current organizational structure is best understood as a flexible, temporary stage of its organizational lifespan. By flexible, I intend to show how ISIS will emphasize different organizational strengths as it is denied major urban centers. Its urban defeats are not permanent, and its resurgence, like al-Qaida before it, presents a realistic threat. This framing will help governments and researchers better grasp the long-term nature of anti-ISIS efforts beyond military victories, and locate areas to pressure the group’s existing organizational nodes. I seek to demonstrate how ISIS’ defeat in urban terrain initiates a transition in the group’s organizational structure from “governing to guerrilla style terrorist organization” (*Institute for the Study of War*, 2017). This transitional period is crucial to the group’s morale and survival. I identify a process of *internal referencing*, by which ISIS is drawing lessons from its own organizational past to manage a transition and handle the implications of defeat. Its underlying organizational structure prior to its entrance into major urban centers will aid the group as it moves forward. Because vulnerabilities of insurgent governance are a main point of this thesis, my final discussion considers the pitfalls of ISIS’ excessive visible violence in relation to achieving its political goals.

### 5.1 Protracted War Theory and ISIS

#### I. Protracted War and Popular Implementers

Framing ISIS’ organizational structure in protracted war theory underlines the fluid, flexible nature of insurgent organizations, thus I join authors such as Garstein-Ross, Barr,

Moreng, and Fritz (2015) in utilizing the doctrines of popular “practitioners” (Weinstein, 2007) of protracted war, Che Guevara and Mao Zedong, to aid our understanding of ISIS’ rise to urban governor. To begin this discussion, it is necessary to provide sufficient historical background. Maoist theory of war, popularly known as *protracted war*, is a prominent topic in studies of civil war and insurgent movements. It derives from Mao tse-Tung, a Chinese communist and Marxist theorist, who led a *guerilla campaign* against the Chinese government under Chiang Kai-Shek throughout the 1930s in response to Kai Shek’s purge of communists.

After suffering initial military defeats and devastating death toll in the “Long March,” he eventually took power following the expulsion of Chang Sei Tek from China to Taiwan and announced the People’s Republic of China. Mao’s experience as the representative of China’s communist movement and years of resisting the central government inspired his revolutionary theory and articulations of protracted people’s war. His ideas were recorded in *On Guerilla Warfare*. The term “protracted” underscores the long-term, gradual nature of Maoist doctrine. At the base, it calls for popular support and an emphasis on political mobilization prior to a phase of challenging a government in a conventional manner. In other words, Maoist doctrine is population-centric and advocates a ground-up approach. It also articulates a successful guerilla campaign as being broken down into various stages.

First, clandestine support networks should be established to “arouse and organize the people.” (Bar et al., from *On Guerilla Warfare*) On the military front, groups should then confront superior government forces through an attrition strategy and guerilla campaign. These tactics include asymmetric, hit-and-run tactics. Attacks are organized in smaller mobile units that avoid exposed confrontation with more sophisticated military foes. After imposing costs on the opponent, a group should then shift to conventional confrontation. Throughout each stage, the

political strategy is continuously emphasized. Indeed, Mao was reluctant to launch military offensives from areas that were not “prepared politically” (Bar et. al, 2015: 4). Al-Qaida leader, Aymen al-Zawahiri, took a page out of Mao’s playbook when in August 2015, he “called on Sunnis in Iraq to reorganize and wage a ‘long-term guerrilla war’ to oust the government from their cities” (Loveday, 2017). Zawahiri urged a long-term approach that would enable his organization to regroup, reassess, and prepare a pathway to eventual defeat of government opponents.

Next is Ernesto Che Guevara, a Cuban guerilla and Marxist revolutionary partnered with Fidel Castro who took part in the successful overthrow of the Cuban Batista government of the 1950s. His approach to rebellion, *Focoism*, takes a similar stance on the importance of interaction with non-combatants as the crutch of success. Guevara was concerned with alienating populations through the overuse of indiscriminate violence and took interest in the acceptable set of behaviors an insurgent should engage in. Thus, Guevara was concerned with public image and population perceptions of insurgents. Weinstein elaborates further as he quotes Guevara’s *Guerrilla Warfare*: “The guerrilla fighter, as a person conscious of a role in the vanguard of the people, must have a moral conduct . . .” (29). Speaking of risks and vulnerabilities, Guevara also emphasized that indiscriminate violence threatened insurgent organizations due its potential to alienate and create innocent victims. Despite this productive belief, Guevara did not shy away from coercive behaviors. He believed in the utility of violence as a method to “inspire the peasants to rise up” (Bar et. al, 2015: 4), and spoke of harsh punishments as an efficient method to reinforce discipline. Guevara attempted to implement his successful guerilla strategies executed in Cuba elsewhere in the Congo and Bolivia.

## II. ISIS and Protracted War

Applying Mao Zedong's protracted war theory and Che Guevara's Focoist writings will help visualize how ISIS appeared to "skip" steps of protracted war as it seized extensive territory in Iraq and Syria, deployed violence to compel support, and confronted its enemies in a shockingly effective, conventional manner. Popular discussions in journalistic circles will reference ISIS' "return to the desert," yet do not provide context for this spatial evolution that depicts the group as moving from one geographic zone to the next. In January 2008, LTG Raymond Odierno commented: "Al Qaida has been pushed out of urban centers like Baghdad, Ramadi, Fallujah and Baqubah, and forced into isolated rural areas." The US' counterinsurgency successes did not mark the end of violence or Al-Qaida's capacity to strike with shock and immense destruction. According to the *Center for Strategic and International Studies* (CICS), violence in Iraq throughout 2014 reached the worst levels since the 2006-2007 period. The group's evolution is not a one-way street towards urban governance, as it can work backwards on the stages of protracted war. ISIS is committed to resuming its offensives, challenging urban terrain, and reinforcing claims to have restored a caliphate. If we do not understand how groups like ISIS resurge and persist, we fail to properly confront the problem. Identifying where ISIS can still thrive after expulsion from urban territory helps locate areas to disrupt, target, and pressure the group while it transitions away from its current organizational capacity.

With these characteristics and histories in mind, I now shift to a discussion of how ISIS demonstrates some of Mao's and Guevara's tactics involved in a protracted, guerilla struggle. First, ISIS advocates a strategy much closer to Guevara's *Focoism* for its belief in the utility of violence to "forge the political opinions of Muslim masses" (Bar et. al, 2015: 5). IS views al-Qaida's slower and more deliberate Maoist approach, which awaits the proper political formation

of the people, as too slow” (5). This central critique highlights why ISIS transcended traditional jihadist doctrine by unilaterally declaring the conditions set for an Islamic state. Further, the group also pursues a “hybridized” form of warfare (McFate, 2014), meaning ISIS can deploy conventional attacks, choose to launch mobile, hit-and-run raids on security forces, and plan terrorist attacks to reinforce its continuing presence. These tactics are not mutually exclusive and are all used against the group’s rivals. In addition, these tactics often coincide with ISIS’ strength. During its strongest point, ISIS acted like a military and seized extensive urban terrain while overrunning heavily equipped adversaries. It started offensives, sieged cities, and held ground while administering extensive services and major cities. However, in a much weaker stage throughout 2008 and before its resurgence, the group focused on guerilla terrorist tactics against security forces. Moreover, ISIS did not forget the political aspect of its campaign while launching military offensives. As Zelin (2014) makes clear, ISIS tends to confront its enemies conventionally in the latter stages of its territorial consolidation, after it has organized and embedded itself within urban terrain. He writes, “With an area secure, “it can maneuver more easily and take an open war posture” (3). This resembles Mao’s tendency to emphasize the political “preparation” of a population as a pre-requisite to pursuing offensives (Gar et. al, 2015). At either of these stages, ISIS does not abandon one tactic at the expense of another. As shown above with “hybridized warfare,” it carries on pressuring in multiple ways.

Barret (2014) effectively articulates the adaptive nature of ISIS’ military structure when he informs us, “Its underground cells became military divisions and its hit-and-run tactics became campaigns to conquer and hold territory” (5). This process will likely be reversed in the coming years. ISIS fighters that remain can return and join clandestine cells that will press on operationally, maintaining raids, ambushes, targeted bombings, and suicide attacks. As ISIS

retracts to historic desert areas of operation while continuing to pressure its opponents, the group demonstrates a “flexible oscillation” along the insurgent “continuum” (Ashworth, 1991: 87). ISIS reached the ultimate stage of urban control, and possesses the ability to pull back its presence and exert itself in less conventional means to sustain itself. Its ultimate goal, however, remains its return to the city and another climb up the organizational continuum.

## **5.2 Learning from Past Jihadists: External and Internal Referencing**

### **I. External Referencing: A Conceptual Foundation**

Barry Posen (1993), who applies the realist theory of international relations and *security dilemma* at the intra-state level,<sup>4</sup> describes how ethnic, religious, or cultural groups reference each other’s capabilities and threat when imperial or state structures break down. In the absence of a central authority providing security, intra-state groups must maximize their own protection. Historical relations and past conflicts come to the foreground to inform a group’s perception of another. In Posen’s (1993) example of Yugoslavia’s disintegration, the Croats and Serbs assessed each other’s capabilities and level of threat. Both ethnic groups possessed historically-informed expectations and suspicions of each other’s behavior, such as past targeting and violence during World War II. Posen’s (1993) piece provides a sufficient conceptual background for the context of Iraq and Syria. ISIS likely did the same as it weighed respective strengths and capabilities against the plethora of rival insurgents operating in Syria and Iraq after the US invasion and at the outbreak of the Syrian revolution. It operated in a tough environment, attempting to hold off

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<sup>4</sup> The security dilemma refers to the efforts of one state to increase its own capabilities, which makes other states feel insecure and threatened. This creates a dangerous cycle of competition, such as military buildup or arms races, to gain advantage over another state. States may not always be aware their actions trigger insecurity abroad. As Posen writes, “what seems sufficient to one state’s defense will seem, and will often be offensive to its neighbors.”

government and rebel rivals, launch military offensives, deter defection and intelligence penetration, and manage extensive governance tasks.

## **II. Internal Referencing: Financial and Organizational Realms**

What is unique about ISIS and its predecessor is *internal referencing*, or what I define as activating past organizational models and lessons to address present challenges and maintain operation continuity. This type of referencing is most often utilized at the onset of organizational shocks, as a group confronts its changing fortunes. Referencing strategies play a prominent role in insurgent organizational transitions, and inform leadership messaging, regrouping tactics, and responses. This process is similar to what ISI (Islamic State in Iraq) undertook, when the group referred to its AQ (Al-Qaida) roots and organizational tendencies to help guide its transition after defeats following increasing US counterinsurgency pressure. Shapiro et. al (2016) note that ISI drew from its previous experience and affiliation when “building a new jihadist organization” (83). Thus, al-Qaida’s persistence and eventual growth into ISI and ISIS provides an effective point of study for determining how the group can survive beyond urban defeats, manage vulnerabilities, and look to the past for answers. As various AQ-rooted organizational entities evolved throughout the years and separated further from initial roots under Zarqawi’s *Jama’at al-Tawhid wal-Jihad*, the group consistently reproduced aspects of its original components. Organizational name changes, strategic divisions, and a recent separation from al-Qaida should not prevent us from seeing ISIS as intricately connected to its predecessors from which it evolved. ISIS embodies past organizational frameworks and will continue to do as its vulnerabilities are exposed.

The financial realm is one of ISIS’ most prominent points of reference. ISIS did not forget where it came from when organizing its financial sources. It learned what worked and

exploited similar means of obtaining significant revenue as it governed urban terrain, especially in areas like Mosul where its predecessors operated. For instance, in a testimony to Congress, Matthew Levitt (2014) notes that some of ISIS habits, including its facilitation of funds and fighters to Syria or Iraq through foreign-based donors, has “operational echoes of the old AQI” (8). These foreign donors have historically provided funds to both AQI and ISIS, yet on a smaller scale than other sources of revenue. This demonstrates that ISIS, like AQI before it, is not overly reliant upon foreign donations. In addition, both ISIS and AQI found ways to exploit the population and coercively obtain wealth. In August 2008 through January 2009, “AQI’s Ninewa administration, including the key city of Mosul, recorded \$4,820,090 in revenues, or roughly \$964,000 per month” (Shapiro et. al, 2016: 195). The top sources of its wealth during this period included the extortion of oil and construction-related infrastructure and stolen goods. AQI recorded these numbers amidst increased pressure. ISIS continued many of the same habits inside Iraq and Syria, targeting not only resources and businesses within its territorial reach but also economic infrastructure and populations.

Its’ organizational structure is another area adopted and adapted by ISIS as its governance evolved post-2014 with the declaration of a caliphate. Shapiro et. al (2016) determine there is “remarkable similarity between al-Qaida’s ideal structure and what ISI sought to establish” (68). ISIS is continuing this process through a bureaucratic and hierarchical structure. Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi leads from the top-down and ISIS’ core structure is reproduced at the local level. *Amirs*, or the heads of *wilayets* (states), are tasked with managing various provincial functions, including military, security, governance, legal, and financial. Baghdadi, like his predecessor, is advised through a *Shura Council*. Despite the rebranding and ideological



divergences between ISIS and its AQ predecessor, the group reproduced this hierarchical structure, suitable for both its commitment to governance tasks and military objectives.

### **III. The Future of Referencing: Operational Capacity**

The financial and organizational realms are two areas that lend insight into ISIS' mimicking of past organizational frameworks, even with those it ideologically and strategically disagreed with. Moving forward, ISIS will strive to maintain persistent attack networks and counteroffensive capabilities. ISIS' enduring operational capacity is already at play throughout Iraq and Syria. Amidst coalition successes in numerous urban settings, ISIS consistently responded with diversionary attacks and bombings designed to distract from anti-ISIS offensives, exploit political tensions of the US-led coalition, and demonstrate its persistent threat. Despite successes in Mosul starting in the fall of 2016, the group launched VBIED (Vehicle Born Improvised Explosive Device) attacks throughout Baghdad in crowded neighborhoods, recently liberated areas, and against Iraqi security checkpoints. For example, in late December 2016, ISIS launched attacks targeting central, southeastern, and northwestern Baghdad on New Years Eve. In Syria around the same time, ISIS briefly re-entered Palmyra after a joint Russia-Syrian offensive expelled the group in March 2016. According to the *Washington Post's* Baghdad bureau chief, Loveday Morris (2017), ISIS is attempting to reassert itself in Ramadi. McFate and Gutowski (2016) of *Institute for the Study of War* also single out Ramadi as one location where ISIS is trying to reinvigorate networks. At the start of the New Year, the group targeted the heavily-defended shrine city of Najaf with gunmen and a suicide vehicle. Further, ISIS initiated diversionary attacks against the cities of Rutbah, Sinjar, and Kirkuk in October 2016. These are just a few of the attacks carried out by ISIS, and emphasize the group's lingering ability to

coordinate sophisticated attacks in multiple locations, and penetrate enemy lines. As the *Institute for the Study of War* concludes in its Iraq Situation Report, “. . . despite its losses in Mosul, ISIS is capable of reopening old fronts . . .” Many of these old fronts are located along historical geographic rings starting from Baghdad and spreading out across Iraq’s Anbar and Jazeera deserts. Major cities included in this historic sanctuary include Fallujah, Ramadi, and Tikrit. AQI also navigated these “maneuver zones,” which today offer ISIS a place to regroup, organize, and attack Iraqi Security Forces both close to and far from Baghdad (McFate, 2014). Aside from regional-based operations in Iraq and Syria, Western security agencies are increasingly worried about the return of a population of foreign fighters as the caliphate unwinds. Istanbul, Paris, Brussels, and Nice are a few reminders of ISIS operational capacity abroad, and its connections to operatives who have traveled from ISIS-controlled territory into Europe.

History offers us many lessons when it comes to the sustainability and trajectory of jihadist projects in Iraq and Syria. This discussion of referencing past habits and structures demonstrates that as ISIS transitions away from its phase as an overt governor, its underlying organizational structure will guide this process. It also offers many implications for policymakers and governments focused on countering the group, especially in terms of locating the group’s vulnerabilities to target after their expulsion from cities. If we can learn how the group resurged no less than five years ago, its efforts can be constrained. ISIS is adaptive, and views the past as an effective reference when dealing with fundamental challenges and transitions. So should its enemies. ISIS is best studied in the context of its predecessors if we are to learn how a group rebounds under immense pressure. Name changes and strategic disagreements do not make al-Qaida structures obsolete or irrelevant to the current organizational manifestation in ISIS.

### **5.3 The Sustainability of Coercion and Insurgent Violence**

Violence and coercion, like urban control, has both its benefits and vulnerabilities. Coercion forces us to consider an important question that is central to my thesis: the sustainability of urban governance. Mampilly (2011) agrees that ensuring civilians who lie on the fence do not defect or collaborate with an incumbent government or rival rebel group is central to insurgent strategy. He writes, “The key for rebel leaders is to ensure that this passive majority does not turn on the insurgency as a result of the organization's’ negative behavior or more attractive conditions offered by rival actors” (Mampilly, 2011). Along these lines, the minimum insurgents seek out is “passive tolerance,” by which civilians “refrain from taking any action against the rebels including betrayal), and in their passivity, allow the rebels to operate in their vicinity” (Mason, 1989: 73). This creates a paradox, by which insurgents use alienating and coercive measures to compel passive tolerance.

Scholars presented in this thesis underline the “logical” or “strategic nature” of various levels and intensity of violence (Wood, 2010; Kalyvas, 2003 and 2006; Weinstein, 2007; Mampilly, 2011) used by insurgents in civil war while also presenting the potential counterproductive nature of this strategy (Kalyvas, 2006; Wood, 2010; Weinstein, 2007), especially in the context of collaboration and gaining proper information to pursue less alienating, more selective violence. One of Kalyvas’ (2006) and Weinstein’s (2007) main propositions is that to be effective, violence should be limited to selective targeting, because indiscriminate strategies are more limited when full control is not established and may push individuals towards resistance rather than collaboration with insurgents. In the long term, it likely “breeds resentment and creates incentives for civilians to collaborate with incumbents” (Wood, 2010: 604).

While coercive measures can help achieve a certain level of compliance, deter potential acts of opposition, and shift civilians towards quiet acceptance of the group, at what point will it lead to alienation? McCants (2015) places ISIS brutality into historical context, reminding us that “violence and gore work. We forget that this terrifying approach to state buildings has an impressive track record” (148). Violence has played a role in subduing opponents and expanding empires’ limits for ages. Yet for ISIS, this focus has its limits and lacks long-term sustainability. The group must cultivate support if it intends to construct an enduring state with population and territory, and extreme violence executed in visible manners cannot work forever. Richard Barret, an advisor at the Soufan Group and former British intelligence officer, recognizes these long-term vulnerabilities of ISIS’ model and the limits of violence used as a long-term tool to maintain its support and status.

[t]he State has also attempted to consolidate its territorial gains by developing an administrative capacity. This has meant that as well as attracting fighters to its ranks, it has also set out to build a cadre of civilian technocrats. It is in this area that the long-term weaknesses of the State are most evident (9).

The group maximized its benefits in the short-term. ISIS’ *compliance by violence* strategy is vulnerable, just like its urban control in the long run.

Some of Al-Qaida’s leadership even considered the necessity of popular support. Zawahiri advised Zarqawi in his 2005 correspondence, “[t]he strongest weapon which the mujahedeen enjoy—after the help and granting of success by God—is popular support from the Muslim masses in Iraq, and the surrounding Muslim countries. So, we must maintain this support

as best we can, and we should strive to increase it. Dr. Jacob Shapiro et. al presents a similar al-Qaida correspondence during a 2013 *New America* panel event titled “The Terrorist’s Dilemma: Managing Covert Organizations.” This time, a senior leader of al-Qaida in Iraq instructs the leader of Ramadi’s cell to “[s]top killing people unless they are spying, military, or police officers . . . if we continue using the same method, people will start fighting us in the streets.” From these examples, leaders of terrorist organizations also recognize the potentially harmful effects of excessive or indiscriminate violence against civilian populations in areas under their control. In other words, these are not topics only considered with an academic, government, or counterinsurgent context. Terrorist organizations have internally discussed proper methods of dealing with populations in pursuit of establishing an Islamic State, while also chastising affiliates or cells acting outside of desired behavior. These debates shall continue in the future not only between academics, but also in the extremist realm, on how to balance the use of violence as a governing tactic while also gaining support and solidifying gains.

#### **5.4 Conclusion**

*Baqiyya wa tatamaddad* (remaining and expanding) is one of ISIS’ popular slogan (Al-Tamimi, 2014). It does not hold up so well to realities on the ground in Iraq and Syria. The “expanding” aspect of this slogan suffers many setbacks. Yet, it will likely remain and save expansion for later. The group reached its apex of control before losing territory on a large scale to a variety of enemies. A similar path occurred for al-Qaida in Iraq before it. The “end” of the territorial caliphate appears to be following the same course, and represents the end of a temporary organizational phase rather than a permanent defeat. The US and its partners have achieved major successes since ISIS’ overwhelming 2014 charge across Iraq and Syria. The

group entered a new phase at that time. ISIS found itself administering territory, controlling resources and security, and fighting its enemies in a more conventional manner. Urban terrain greatly serves its organizational goals and strengthens its capabilities in the short-term. ISIS projects itself onto urban environments, co-opts infrastructure, surrounded civilians with political, religious, and ideological symbols, and carries out extensive indoctrination plans to win support and secure its longevity. The city proves to be prime ground for ISIS' extreme violence and its dissemination. Yet as the years pass, ISIS' urban control and current model appears increasingly vulnerable and exposed to superior adversaries. While military defeats, denying sources of revenue, and damaging the group's legitimacy and claims are accomplishments in the short-term, those fighting the group must prepare for the next stage. ISIS, like its predecessors, already has.

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