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Everyday Life in the Islamic State's Wilayat al-Raqqah

Beyond Material Support: Promoting ISIL Accountability for Atrocity Crimes

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Introduction

When the Islamic State of Iraq officially entered Syria in April 2013, renaming itself the Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham (ISIS), it began the process of creating an alternative governance project to not only the Syrian regime, but also in contradistinction to the other Syrian insurgent factions fighting the regime. Many of the ideas and administrative tools that ISIS and later its completed form, “The Islamic State” (IS) after June 2014, were first experimented within Syria before being exported to IS’s governance project next door in Iraq. The center of IS activity in Syria was its base in the city of al-Raqqah and broader Wilayat al-Raqqah (al-Raqqah Province), which it first took over from an amalgamation of Syrian insurgent factions in the summer of 2013. It should be noted, however, that IS had other proclaimed provinces in Syria, too (Halab, al-Barakah, al-Khayr, etc). In many ways, due to al-Raqqah’s centrality in IS’s governance project, it became the most mature version of its governing model as well as being the location of many of its tens of thousands of foreign fighters. This model was carbon-copied in varying degrees: first, to its various internal provinces within Iraq and Syria and, later, to its external provinces globally.

This paper aims to gain an understanding of everyday life in IS’s Wilayat al-Raqqah, a topic that has been relatively underexplored in both academic and policy-making circles. While there have been discussions of governance and statecraft of IS in a general sense and some deeper case studies on life under IS in Mosul and Ninawa Province in Iraq, this has not been the case in respect of its Syrian capital of al-Raqqah.¹ This paper builds on past efforts to

- 1 Aymenn Jawad al-Tamimi, “The Islamic State’s Real Estate Department: Documents and Analysis,” *ISIS Files*, June 2020, <https://isisfiles.gwu.edu/concern/reports/8336h188j?locale=en>; Aaron Y. Zelin, “My Beloved Brothers in God, This Is An Invitation: The Islamic State’s Dawa and Mosques Administration,” *ISIS Files*, December 2020, <https://isisfiles.gwu.edu/concern/reports/4q-77fr33m?locale=en>; Sara Zeiger, Farangiz Atamurdova, Lilah El Sayed, and Muna Chung, “Planting the Seeds of the Poisonous Tree: Establishing a System of Meaning Through ISIS Education,” *ISIS Files*, February 2021, <https://isisfiles.gwu.edu/concern/reports/j3860694x?locale=en>; Beatrice De Graaf and Ahmet S. Yayla, “Policing as Rebel Governance: The Islamic State Police,” *ISIS Files*, April 2021, <https://isisfiles.gwu.edu/concern/reports/4t64gn166?locale=en>; Anas Ellame, Aram Shabaniyan, Craig Whiteside, and Moorthy Muthuswamy, “The Islamic State’s Department of Soldiers,” *ISIS Files*, April 2021, <https://isisfiles.gwu.edu/concern/reports/c247ds10z?locale=en>; Deborah Margolin, and Charlie Winter, “Women in the Islamic State: Victimization, Support, Collaboration, and Acquiescence,” *ISIS Files*, June 2021, <https://isisfiles.gwu.edu/concern/reports/f1881k934?locale=en>; Tati Fontana, Deborah Margolin, Mathilde Aarseth, Hans Christensen Becker, and Mark Maffett, “You Reap What You Sow: The Importance of Agriculture to the Islamic State’s Governance Strategy,” *ISIS Files*, June 2021, <https://isisfiles.gwu.edu/concern/reports/2n49t1699?locale=en>; Aymenn Jawad al-Tamimi, “The System of Zakat and Charities Under the Islamic State,” *ISIS Files*, June 2021, <https://isisfiles.gwu.edu/concern/reports/1z40ks818?locale=en>; Asaad Almohammad and Clemens Holzgruber, “Moral Dominance: Policing Minds, Spirits, Bodies, and Markets,” *ISIS Files*, June 2021, <https://isisfiles.gwu.edu/concern/reports/zs25x847n?locale=en>; Haroro J. Ingram and Deborah Margolin, “Inside the Islamic State in Mosul: A Snapshot of the Logic & Banality of Evil,” *ISIS Files*, June 2020, <https://isisfiles.gwu.edu/concern/reports/4j03cz64w?locale=en>; Mara Redlich Revkin, “Competitive Governance and Displacement Decisions Under Rebel Rule: Evidence from the Islamic State in Iraq,” *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, Volume 65, Issue 1, <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/full/10.1177/0022002720951864>; “When the Islamic State Comes to Town: The Economic Impact of Islamic State Governance in Iraq and Syria,” *RAND Corporation*, 2017, https://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/research_reports/RR1900/RR1970/RAND_RR1970.pdf; Christoph Günther and Tom Kaden, “The Authority of the Islamic State,” Working Paper No. 169, *Max Planck Institute for Social Anthropology*, 2016, https://pure.mpg.de/rest/items/item_2395427_5/component/file_2395428/content; Burak Kadercan, “Territorial logic of the Islamic State: an interdisciplinary approach,” *Territory, Politics, Governance*, Volume 9, Issue 1, 2021, <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/21622671.2019.1589563>; Tim Jacoby, “The Islamic “State”: sovereignty, territoriality and governance,” *International Politics*, Volume 60, 2023, <https://link.springer.com/article/10.1057/s41311-020-00277-x>; Aaron Y. Zelin, “The Islamic State’s Territorial Methodology,” *Washington Institute for Near East Policy*, January 2016, <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/islamic-states-territorial-methodology>; Aaron Zelin, “Experts weigh in (part 3): Is ISIS good at governing?,” *Brookings Institution*, February 9, 2016, <https://www.brookings.edu/articles/experts-weigh-in-part-3-is-isis-good-at-governing/>; Aymenn al-Tamimi, “The Evolution in Islamic State Administration: The Documentary Evidence,” *Perspectives on Terrorism*, Volume 9, Issue 4, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/26297420?seq=1>; Matthew Bamber-Zryd, “Cyclical jihadist governance: the Islamic State governance cycle in Iraq and Syria,” *Small Wars & Insurgencies*, Volume 33, Issue 8, 2022, <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/09592318.2022.2116182>.

better understand IS governance across multiple territories. Consequently, this case study hopes to provide deeper and more nuanced insights into a resident's average day or week. In particular, this paper examines IS's administrative and bureaucratic apparatus, activities, and how they were implemented on a daily basis; what local and foreign residents living under IS rule in Wilayat al-Raqqah would have experienced and been exposed to; and how IS would try to instrumentalize the populace to integrate them into its system and push its broader agenda for long-term stability and sustainability in its state-building project. In so doing, the analysis highlights the everyday lived reality within IS's Wilayat al-Raqqah in multiple spheres of its rule.

It should be emphasized that different individuals had different roles within this society, and anything officially recorded usually only applied to men due to the patriarchal nature of the Islamic State's project. For example, in Aymenn al-Tamimi's paper on IS membership categories, he notes that there is "a three-way distinction [that] can be drawn for adult male involvement in the Islamic State: those who gave allegiance and became fully-fledged members (*mubayi'un*), those who were "supporters" and did not give allegiance, but were in some kind of probation status where they could request to give allegiance and become members after serving in the group's ranks for a long enough period (*munasirun*), and employees who performed various sorts of functions (technocratic or menial) in return for remuneration specified in a contract, but without giving allegiance or necessarily being considered a *munasir*."² As for women, there was not anything as formalized as such and much of it was in relation to one's male family member, husband, or prospective husband.

This paper hopes to fill a gap since there has not yet been a study on the everyday life of people in IS's Wilayat al-Raqqah. As a consequence, this analysis can provide novel insights into what foreigners who were members of IS would have been involved in or exposed to, which has particular value given the difficulties of obtaining detailed information on the tasks and conduct of those based in IS territory. Therefore, this study can be a useful proxy that uncovers the realities of the lived experience that those who once lived in IS territory and who, prior to or since the collapse of IS territorial control in Syria between 2017 and 2019, had either returned home or who remain imprisoned in northeast Syria.

Most notably, this study firmly demonstrates IS's attempts to have a totalizing effect on society by trying to control all aspects of individuals' lives. As a result, the group made it impossible for anyone living within its territory to be ignorant of the type of rule IS had, even amongst those who disagreed with the group's ideology, conduct and/or governance or at times maybe tried to flout it, to their peril.

Due to constraints of time and space, this paper will not cover every single aspect of life within Wilayat al-Raqqah, which could easily fill the pages of a book. Nevertheless, it seeks to provide a vista into life inside an Islamic State controlled area. In many ways, to understand IS's *raison d'être* and what they hope for in everyday life, one only has to listen to members of the group and what they say for themselves. For example, one of its media officials explained, "We don't want a happy life, the opposite, such things take us away from God. The harder the situation is, the closer we are to God."³ In a nutshell, that is the Islamic State experience.

² Aymenn al-Tamimi, "Membership of the Islamic State and Other Forms of Involvement," *Center for Justice and Accountability*.

³ "Grooming Children for Jihad: The Islamic State," *Vice News*, August 8, 2014, https://youtu.be.jzCAPJDAnQA?si=22YZU8zB2SVn6sE_.

Background on al-Raqqah before the Islamic State

On the eve of the Syrian uprising in 2011, al-Raqqah governorate had just below a million residents, according to the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs.⁴ Prior to the uprising, al-Raqqah had no history of jihadi mobilization or extremism. This has mostly been observed in Syria's Aleppo, Damascus, Idlib, and Deir al-Zour regions as may be discerned from an examination of foreign fighters who went to Iraq in the decade prior to joining IS's predecessor groups.

The al-Raqqah region is known for its tribal nature and had been mostly pro-Assad regime or at least co-opted by the regime politically. This is why in the beginning of the uprising it took time for the opposition to be mobilized there, and is the reason for the low death counts for locals in comparison to other locals that rose up against the regime.⁵ Syrian President Bashar al-Assad even prayed at a mosque in al-Raqqah during Eid al-Adha in June 2012.⁶ Rania Abouzeid explains that "Raqqah City was once dubbed the 'hotel of the revolution' because it became home to hundreds of thousands of people displaced from fighting elsewhere who sought refuge in a place considered firmly in the grip of Syrian President Bashar Assad."⁷

However, due to the continued regime massacres against civilian populations throughout Syria, as well as increased violence within al-Raqqah due to the growing insurgency from neighboring governorates, more and more individuals became mobilized to protest, while others either joined a local Free Syrian Army (FSA) battalion or more extremist elements like Ahrar al-Sham or Jabhat al-Nusrah (JN), the latter at the time being a front for the Islamic State of Iraq.

The first signs of success in al-Raqqah governorate against the Syrian regime forces occurred in September 2012 when the FSA's Kata'ib al-Faruq took the town and border crossing of Tal Abyad with Turkey.⁸ The first jihadi-related successes in al-Raqqah came with the takeover of Tabqa and its dam in early February 2013 by JN.⁹ This was succeeded by the eventual takeover by JN, Ahrar al-Sham, and to a lesser extent other FSA rebel groups of al-Raqqah city in early March 2013, making it the first Syrian provincial capital to fall to the opposition.¹⁰ There was palpable excitement from locals even if they did not like JN, as Marwan Hisham explains, "Walking those streets, I felt I could do anything. I was free, I thought. I was happy, filled with the fragile, exaggerated belief that this time, this city would be ours."¹¹ Of course, things were about to change.

4 "Syrian Arab Republic – Governorates profile," *United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs*, June 2014, <https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/Syria%20governorate%20profiles%206%20August%202014.pdf>.

5 Aron Lund, "Syrian Jihadism," *Swedish Institute of International Affairs*, September 14, 2012, <https://www.ui.se/globalassets/butiken/ui-brief/ui-brief-no.-13-2012.pdf>.

6 Ziad Haydar, "Syria: Raqqah Lies in Ruins," *al-Safir*, March 6, 2013, <https://web.archive.org/web/20130315145147/https://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/security/2013/03/raqqah-syria-destruction.html>.

7 Rania Abouzeid, "How Islamist Rebels in Syria Are Ruling a Fallen Provincial Capital," *TIME*, March 23, 2013, <https://world.time.com/2013/03/23/how-islamist-rebels-in-syria-are-ruling-a-fallen-provincial-capital>.

8 Kadir Celikkan, "Syrian rebels extend grip on Turkish border," *Reuters*, September 19, 2012, <https://www.reuters.com/article/syria-crisis-idUSL5E8KJ8NR20120919>.

9 "Syrian rebels capture major dam," *AFP*, February 11, 2013, <https://www.timesofisrael.com/syrian-rebels-and-army-fight-to-control-major-dam>.

10 "Syria rebels capture northern Raqqah city," *al-Jazeera*, March 5, 2013, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2013/3/5/syria-rebels-capture-northern-raqqah-city>.

11 Marwan Hisham and Molly Crabapple, *Brothers of the Gun: Memoirs of the Syrian War*, One World: London, 2018, 119.

After taking over the city, JN positioned itself for future administration by taking “control of bakeries and the distribution of flour and fuel, and in some instances, it has sparked tensions with local fighters by trying to stop people from smoking in the streets.”¹² JN also warned against theft by “spray-paint[ing] messages around the city warning against theft: ‘A thief’s hand will be cut. Signed Jabhat al-Nusra’.”¹³ Still, JN attempted to return life to normalcy. Even the leader of JN in al-Raqqah, Abu Sa’ad al-Hadrami, called for civil servants to return to work in a letter signed on March 17, 2013.¹⁴ However, due to JN and Ahrar al-Sham calling for the use of the shahadah black flag,¹⁵ which they described as the “flag of the Caliphate state,”¹⁶ over the tri-color Syrian revolutionary flag alongside pushing for women to cover up with abayas, there were small protests against these new rulers.¹⁷ For example, one of the posters from the protests stated “we did not pay with the blood of our sons just so that you could violate our dignity again.”¹⁸ Individuals even pushed back directly at JN members to their face by noting that everyone living in al-Raqqah was Muslim already so these measures were unnecessary (though there was a small Christian and Alawite community).¹⁹ Nevertheless, this push for stable administration and more conservative norms provided the ideational base that ISIS would be able to take advantage of in the succeeding months when it would eventually take over al-Raqqah.

However, there were differences with JN and ISIS’s methodologies. Unlike the typical modus operandi of jihadis at the time, Jawlani and JN when it began to build itself up in Syria in 2012 did so not as a clandestine organization; rather, it sought to work with other insurgents fighting against the Assad regime. Through initial social services and not targeting ideological rivals in the early years of the civil war, JN became more embedded within the social fabric of the population. The initial fruits of this success were seen when the U.S. designated JN as a foreign terrorist organization and an extension of ISI in December 2012. Yet, in response, the Syrian opposition and rebels backed JN.²⁰

As a consequence of this, and the fact that Jawlani was ignoring Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi’s requests to begin liquidating opposition activists and rebel factions that were deemed un-Islamic (meaning most, if not all, from ISI’s perspective),²¹ al-Baghdadi announced the Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham in April 2013 to show that in fact he was behind the successes of JN.²² Yet Jawlani pivoted and pledged *baya* (a religious oath of allegiance) to Ayman al-Zawahiri

- 12 Liz Sly, “Islamic law comes to rebel-held areas of Syria,” *The Washington Post*, March 19, 2013, https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/middle_east/islamic-law-comes-to-rebel-held-syria/2013/03/19/b310532e-90af-11e2-bdea-e32ad90da239_story.html.
- 13 Abouzeid, “How Islamist Rebels in Syria Are Ruling a Fallen Provincial Capital.”
- 14 Ibid.
- 15 “There is no god but God and Muhammad is the messenger of God”
- 16 “How the jihadi factions are willing to apply Shari’a in al-Raqqah,” *Levant & Beyond*, April 1, 2013, <https://levantnbeyond.blogspot.com/2013/04/how-jihadi-factions-are-willing-to.html>.
- 17 Abouzeid, “How Islamist Rebels in Syria Are Ruling a Fallen Provincial Capital.”
- 18 Originally shared here: <https://www.facebook.com/michael.nahum.3/posts/476597932409981>. Author retains archived version.
- 19 Rabia Abouzeid, “A Black Flag in Raqqah,” *New Yorker*, April 2, 2013, <https://www.newyorker.com/news/news-desk/a-black-flag-in-raqqah>.
- 20 Aaron Y. Zelin, “Rally ‘Round the Jihadist,” *Foreign Policy*, December 11, 2012, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2012/12/11/rally-round-the-jihadist>.
- 21 WikiBaghdady, “Asrar dawlah al-baghdadi #daish,” December 14, 2013-June 13, 2014, archived at <https://docs.google.com/document/d/1wEQ0FKosa1LcUB3tofeub1UxaT5A-suROyDExgV9nUY>. Originally posted here: <https://twitter.com/wikibaghdady>.
- 22 Abu Bakr al-Hussayni al-Qurayshi al-Baghdadi, “Announcement of the Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham,” *al-Furqan Foundation for Media Production*, April 9, 2013, <https://jihadology.net/2013/04/09/al-furqan-media-presents-a-new-audio-message-from-the-islamic-state-of-iraqs-shaykh-abu-bakr-al-%E1%B8%A5ussayni-al-qurayshi-al-baghdadi-announcement-of-the-islamic-state-of-iraq-an>.

moving JN outside the ISIS orbit,²³ which led to outright fighting between the two groups in Syria in spring 2014 and the splintering of the jihadi movement.²⁴ As a consequence, a number of more hardline local members of JN as well as foreign fighters defected to ISIS. It has been claimed that the Syrians who chose ISIS were from the lowest rungs of society: “smugglers, ex-offenders, street vendors of cigarettes and so on...and have been giving them both power and prestige. In return, they cling to Daesh: they owe it everything they have.”²⁵ However, in the first few months after this rift, on the ground, it appeared as if JN and ISIS remained synonyms for one another, at least within al-Raqqah (since there was a greater cleavage between the two in places like Aleppo).²⁶

Either way, the first real signs that ISIS was operating openly as its own entity within al-Raqqah happened in mid-May 2013 when three Alawite individuals were executed in public as revenge for the Assad regime’s crimes against “the Free women of Banyas and Homs.”²⁷ This started the process whereby ISIS began to overshadow JN as a brand and group locally, due to many foreign fighters choosing ISIS over JN.²⁸ However, JN was able to supplement these losses with FSA fighters defecting to it, thus allowing both groups to survive independently of one another.²⁹

By July, overt ISIS activity within al-Raqqah had become more ubiquitous.³⁰ For example, if you were walking or driving around the city, you would notice that the skyline would have a number of billboards advocating the work of ISIS’s sharia courts and dawa office.³¹ ISIS even had billboard advertisements urging/ encouraging women to wear the niqab with the slogan “My modesty... the secret of my beauty.”³² The reality for many women now living in the caliphate was far more brutal. For example, one of the local Raqqan women interviewed by journalist Rania Abouzeid, disclosed that she “was forced to be with seven ISIS fighters, they married her one after the other on the same night. It was gang rape.”³³

- 23 Abu Muhammad al-Jawlani, “About the Fields of al-Sham,” *al-Manarah al-Bayda’ Foundation for Media Production*, April 10, 2013, <https://jihadology.net/2013/04/10/al-manarah-al-bay%E1%B8%8Da-foundation-for-media-production-presents-a-new-audio-message-from-jabhat-al-nu%E1%B9%A3rahs-abu-mu%E1%B8%A5ammad-al-jawlani-al-golani-about-the-fields-of-al-sham>.
- 24 Aaron Y. Zelin, “Inside Baseball on Syrian Rebel Infighting,” *War on the Rocks*, February 7, 2014, <https://warontherocks.com/2014/02/inside-baseball-on-syrian-rebel-infighting>; Aaron Y. Zelin, “The War Between ISIS and al-Qaeda for Supremacy of the Global Jihadist Movement,” Research Notes 20, *Washington Institute for Near East Policy*, June 2014, <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/the-war-between-isis-and-al-qaeda-for-supremacy-of-the-global-jihadist>.
- 25 Yassin al-Haj Saleh, *Impossible Revolution: Making Sense of the Syrian Tragedy*, Chicago: Haymarket, 2017, 281.
- 26 Aymenn Jawad al-Tamimi, “Jabhat al-Nusra and the Islamic State of Iraq and ash-Sham: Raqqah Governorate,” *Jihadology*, June 4, 2013, <https://jihadology.net/2013/06/04/guest-post-jabhat-al-nusra-and-the-islamic-state-of-iraq-and-ash-sham-raqqah-governorate>; Aymenn Jawad al-Tamimi, “Jabhat al-Nusra and the Islamic State of Iraq and ash-Sham: Aleppo Area,” *Jihadology*, June 13, 2013, <https://jihadology.net/2013/06/13/musings-of-an-iraqi-brasenostril-on-jihad-jabhat-al-nusra-and-the-islamic-state-of-iraq-and-ash-sham-aleppo-area>; Aymenn Jawad al-Tamimi, “Jabhat al-Nusra and the Islamic State of Iraq and ash-Sham in Raqqah: Demonstrations and Counter-Demonstrations,” *Jihadology*, June 24, 2013, <https://jihadology.net/2013/06/24/musings-of-an-iraqi-brasenostril-on-jihad-jabhat-al-nusra-and-the-islamic-state-of-iraq-and-ash-sham-in-raqqah-demonstrations-and-counter-demonstrations>.
- 27 Pieter Van Ostaeyen, “The ar-Raqqah executions ~ Confirmation of the Islamic State in Iraq and as-Sham,” May 15, 2013, <https://pietervanostaeyen.com/2013/05/15/the-ar-raqqah-executions-confirmation-of-the-islamic-state-in-iraq-and-as-sham>.
- 28 Mariam Karouny, “Syria’s Nusra Front eclipsed by Iraq-based al Qaeda,” *Reuters*, May 17, 2013, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-syria-crisis-nusra/insight-syrias-nusra-front-eclipsed-by-iraq-based-al-qaeda-idUKBRE94G0FY20130517>.
- 29 Mona Mahmood and Ian Black, “Free Syrian Army rebels defect to Islamist group Jabhat al-Nusra,” *The Guardian*, May 8, 2013, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2013/may/08/free-syrian-army-rebels-defect-islamist-group>.
- 30 Aaron Y. Zelin, “Road to the Caliphate: July 1-23, 2013,” *Syrian Jihadism*, July 13, 2023, <https://syrianjihadism.com/2023/07/13/road-to-the-caliphate-july-1-23-2013>.
- 31 Ibid.
- 32 Ibid.
- 33 Rania Abouzeid, *No Turning Back: Life, Loss, and Hope in Wartime Syria*, W.W. Norton & Company: New York, 2018, 552.

Even worse, following IS's August 2014 attack on Sinjar in northern Iraq, the group abducted hundreds of Yazidi women and girls. Some of them were transferred into al-Raqqah by ISIS and sold as so-called "war booty", which is to say, into sex slavery in different markets in the city.³⁴ After being "sold", they would be raped or passed along (through reselling and gifting, for example) by many male IS fighters. All of this shows the major gap between what the Islamic State claimed to be for and what the lived reality was actually like.

Moreover, ISIS began to distribute the leaflet "This Is Our 'Aqidah and Manhaj (Creed and Methodology)" to local residents.³⁵ This became an early sign of ISIS presence in many locations in Iraq and Syria in 2013-2014 and has continued even to this day when IS has introduced the same pamphlet to locals in its global external "provinces," such as in Mali in April 2023.³⁶

In July 2014, ISIS kidnapped and many believe executed Father Paolo Dall'Oglio after he visited al-Raqqah. ISIS never claimed the attack, but Father Dall'Oglio has not been found since.³⁷ Prior to his disappearance, Father Dall'Oglio had served for three decades at the Deir Mar Musa al-Abashi, a 6th-century monastery 50 miles north of Damascus. He has been credited with the reconstruction of the Mar Musa complex and its reinvention as a center of interfaith dialogue.³⁸ Due to his stature within Syria at the time, his abduction and subsequent disappearance was a huge shock and blow. It also illustrated that the way ISIS operated was different than most actors, even JN. Notably, even if ISIS claimed to follow the traditional tenets of Islam, this action underscored that ISIS was capable of contravening long-embedded ideas about Christians (and Jews) being protected as "People of the Book." Instead, according to the United Nations Human Rights Council, ISIS forced conversion upon Christian communities that did not flee IS when they took over.³⁹ Therefore, ISIS rule would be different than anything seen before, notwithstanding ISIS's claims that there was a pact.⁴⁰ Additionally, locations like the Armenian Catholic Church of the Martyrs in al-Raqqah were converted into a center for Islamic State dawa, whereby they "broke the cross" as they described of the Church.⁴¹

This was the beginning of ISIS rule. According to a clerk in the sharia court in al-Raqqah, "We aim to satisfy God, that's why we don't care about International standards."⁴² Raqqan activist Mezar Matar explained that "They banned the sale of alcohol, they tried to close cafes where boys and girls sit together, they banned street theater, cinema, bright colors, and forced women to wear Islamic dress."⁴³ This went a step further than JN's attempts previously

34 "Rule of Terror: Living under ISIS in Syria," *United Nations Human Rights Council*, November 19, 2014, https://www.ohchr.org/sites/default/files/documents/hrbodies/hrcouncil/coisyr/HRC_CRP_ISIS_14Nov2014.pdf.

35 Zelin, "Road to the Caliphate: July 1-23, 2013."

36 Islamic State Select Worldwide Activity Map, "IS Photo Release: 'Control of the Soldiers of the Caliphate over the Strongholds of al-Qaeda in the Sahel,'" *Wilayat al-Sahil Media Office*, May 17, 2023, <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/islamicstateinteractivemap/#view/1699>.

37 Joseph Tulloch, "Father Paolo: Christian monk who disappeared after trying to talk to ISIL," *al-Jazeera*, July 29, 2023, <https://www.aljazeera.com/features/2023/7/29/father-dalloglio-disappearance>.

38 Neil MacFarquhar, "Syria Expels Jesuit Priest Who Spoke for Change," *New York Times*, June 20, 2012, <https://www.nytimes.com/2012/06/21/world/middleeast/syria-expels-activist-roman-catholic-priest.html?pagewanted=all>.

39 "Rule of Terror: Living under ISIS in Syria," *United Nations Human Rights Council*, November 19, 2014, https://www.ohchr.org/sites/default/files/documents/hrbodies/hrcouncil/coisyr/HRC_CRP_ISIS_14Nov2014.pdf.

40 "Christians in the Caliphate: The Islamic State," *Vice News*, August 12, 2014, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cGQwTOsh>.

41 Ibid.

42 Ibid.

43 "Syrian activists flee abuse in al-Qaeda-run Raqqa," *BBC*, November 13, 2013, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-24926584>.

since JN suggested its changes, but didn't initially force them upon anyone.⁴⁴ After JN withdrew from al-Raqqah, however, there were cases in other parts of Syria where the group implemented Islamic criminal penalties until around 2017 when they began an internal reform process. Regardless, concerning ISIS, native Raqqan and influential Syrian activist Yassin al-Hajj argued that, "[ISIS] acts on the communities under its control like a colonial power without the slightest regard for the demands or preferences of the population."⁴⁵

For instance, the aforementioned Hisham explained the "sprawling outrage" of a Tunisian foreign fighter named Abu Qatadah toward locals from al-Raqqah due to the region's alleged "irreligious past." Before arriving in al-Raqqah Abu Qatadah al-Tunisi was told that "the villas on the Euphrates outside the city had been dark places for indecent nightlife, which Satan—represented by sexuality, alcoholic drinks, and music—attended, as his newly seduced victims danced, intoxicated, to the vulgar faux-folkloric songs and squandered their harvest money."⁴⁶ This view, based off of rumors and suppositions, illustrated ISIS's lack of understanding of the local history and culture. This attracted the chagrin of local residents.. Yet for foreigners, everything was viewed through the lens of the Islamic State's worldview and structure.

The Islamic State's Administration

According to IS's grandiose language, its caliphate "is a structure that has become more manifest than the sun in the middle of the sky. It was erected by the arms of defiant men and irrigated by the blood of the martyrs."⁴⁷ This signified how important power and control is for the group. On the other hand, the United Nations Human Rights Council more aptly described IS's caliphate project as "repressive."⁴⁸

At the apex of the caliphate structure is of course the caliph (leader)—at the time of the announcement Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi and as of mid-June 2014 Abu Hafs al-Hashimi al-Qurashi—who is supposed to "uphold and spread the religion, defend the homeland, and fortify the fronts. He prepares the armies, implements the hudud, enforces the people's adherence to the Shari'a rulings, and governs their worldly affairs."⁴⁹

Under the caliph is the Delegated Committee, which carries out the caliph's orders and is composed of "upright, qualified men" (*ahl al-hal wa-l-'aqd*), who must be cognizant, administratively skilled, knowledgeable, and upright individuals.⁵⁰ They also supervise IS's *wilayat* (provinces), *dawawin* (administrations; equivalent to a ministry), and the different committees and offices of the state. The provinces are headed by a *wali* (governor) appointed by the caliph and the *wali* is supposed to refer "serious matters" to the Delegated Committee.⁵¹ At the time of the caliphate announcement, IS had 19 *wilayat* between Iraq and Syria.

44 Abouzeid, "A Black Flag in Raqqa."

45 Saleh, *Impossible Revolution: Making Sense of the Syrian Tragedy*, 295.

46 Hisham and Crabapple, *Brothers of the Gun: Memoirs of the Syrian War*, 192-193.

47 The Islamic State, "The Structure of the Caliphate," *al-Furqan Media*, July 6, 2016, <https://jihadology.net/2016/07/06/new-video-message-from-the-islamic-state-the-structure-of-the-caliphate>.

48 "Rule of Terror: Living under ISIS in Syria," *United Nations Human Rights Council*, November 19, 2014, https://www.ohchr.org/sites/default/files/documents/hrbodies/hrcouncil/coisyrria/HRC_CRP_ISIS_14Nov2014.pdf.

49 The Islamic State, "The Structure of the Caliphate."

50 Ibid.

51 Ibid.

According to IS, the *dawawin* is supposed to be the “place for protecting rights”. It is under the supervision of the Delegated Committee, and has each administration in every province. The *dawawin* are as follows:

- Judgment and Grievances, which is responsible for clarifying and enforcing sharia rulings on “matters of blood, family and marriage-related issues, and wealth,” and resolving disputes;
- Hisbah, which oversees the public and carries out “commanding the good and forbidding evil” (moral policing);
- Dawa and Masajid (Mosques), which trains and appoints clerics and preachers, holds sharia courses, and builds and renovates mosques;
- Zakat, which collects and distributes the tax;
- Soldiery, which manages wars, guards fronts, prepares military raids, dispatches battalions, and trains soldiers;
- Public Security, which is supposed to provide for internal security, protecting IS from “anything that would disrupt it,” and “waging war against infiltration;”
- Treasury, which protects and manages IS wealth, including money derived from natural resources;
- Media, which is responsible for content released by IS;
- Education, which regulates the curriculum, find teachers, and run schools;
- Health, which develops the health sector, “providing medical needs,” and preventing disease;
- Agriculture, which manages agricultural and animal resources and maintains food security;
- Resources, which is involved in the “exploitation of oil, gas, and mineral resources;”
- Fay’ and Ghana’im (War spoils), which involves “counting and safekeeping” spoils of war and allocation of shares; and
- Services, which supplies water and electricity, paves and maintains roads, and maintains public utilities in IS territory.⁵²

Finally, there are the offices and committees, which include the Committee of Hijrah (Emigration), which receives foreign fighters and assigns them to roles within IS; the Committee of Affairs of Prisoners and Martyrs, which seeks to rescue prisoners and looks after the families of martyrs; the Office for Research and Studies, which is involved with researching sharia issues and answering questions related to it; the Administration of Distant Wilayat, which oversees provinces outside of Iraq and Syria (and was only created after Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi’s November 2014 announcement of IS expansion outside of Iraq and Syria); and the Office for Public and Tribal Relations, which provides a link between IS and tribal dignitaries in its territory.⁵³

⁵² Ibid.

⁵³ Ibid.

This sprawling bureaucracy did not necessarily benefit the local population or ensure that their needs were being met. For example, in a Vice News documentary showcasing life in al-Raqqah during Ramadan in 2014, random locals approached a *hisbah* official. They were complaining that someone they knew was arrested for selling juice at a stall that had allegedly caused a traffic jam in the streets. They were hoping for mercy because of the holy month and, in the conversation with the *hisbah* official, complained that their “voice[s] are not being heard.”⁵⁴ The *hisbah* official told them they needed to take it up with the magistrate’s office and not him, even though the locals felt as if their voices would be better heard through this official. Moreover, there were cases where the *hisbah* patrols extorted locals for money instead of admonishing them or pursuing some judicial case with them,⁵⁵ highlighting the fact that even within ISIS governance, there was increasing corruption.

As an illustrative of the Islamic State bureaucracy, the first touch point for those seeking to join IS from the outside of Syria –or for Syrians who had been in Turkey and were attempting to return home– is via IS’s border control structure. It showcases the intricate nature of its bureaucracy, though it should be noted that it only processed men.

Whenever an individual entered Islamic State territory from Turkey to Syria, there was the equivalent of border control, which IS called *al-Idarah al-‘Amah Li-l-Hudud* (The General Administration for the Borders). Documents related to this administration from 2013-2014 (including time after the caliphate announcement) were leaked by an IS defector who had become disillusioned with the organization.⁵⁶ While some claim that the collector of these documents, prior to sharing them with outsiders, could have put the border document forms into template for ease of use, there is no confirmation of his tampering with the forms. Once safely out of IS territory, this individual began trying to sell the archive of documents to news organizations in mid-December 2015.⁵⁷

The Syrian news outlet *Zaman al-Wasl* was the first to publicly report on receiving at least 2,000 of the files in January 2016, though they made no note of whether they paid for them.⁵⁸ *Zaman al-Wasl* would later follow up in early March 2016, publishing 1,736 of the documents they received online.⁵⁹ It’s plausible that the remainder were duplicates. During that week, Western news outlets began reporting on the documents they received as well, including *Süddeutscher Zeitung*, *Norddeutscher Rundfunk*, *Westdeutscher Rundfunk*, *The Guardian*, *Sky News*, and *NBC News*.⁶⁰

54 “Enforcing Sharia in Raqqa: The Islamic State,” *Vice News*, August 11, 2014, <https://youtube.com/watch?v=jOaBNbdUbcA>.

55 Hamoud Mousa, “Al-Hisbah” gives up its work for the sake of money,” *Raqqah Is Being Slaughtered Silently*, February 10, 2015, <https://www.raqqah-sl.com/?p=820>.

56 Stuart Ramsay, “IS Documents Identify Thousands Of Jihadis,” *Sky News*, March 9, 2016, <https://news.sky.com/story/is-documents-identify-thousands-of-jihadis-10198557>; Ammar Cheikh Omar, Richard Engel and Ben Plesser, “Leaked ISIS Personnel Files Paint Picture of Group’s Recruits,” *NBC News*, March 10, 2016, <https://www.nbcnews.com/storyline/isis-uncovered/leaked-isis-personnel-files-paint-picture-group-s-recruits-n535676>.

57 Mike Giglio, Munzer al-Awad, and Mitch Prothero, “Leaked ISIS Documents Tell The Stories Of Hundreds Of Foreign Jihadis,” *Buzzfeed News*, March 19, 2016, <https://www.buzzfeednews.com/article/mikegiglio/leaked-isis-documents-tell-the-stories-of-hundreds-of-foreign>.

58 “Zaman Al Wasl obtains names of ISIS fighters, nationalities and jihadi backgrounds,” *Zaman al-Wasl*, January 20, 2016, <https://en.zamanawsl.net/news/article/13664>.

59 “Exclusive: 1736 documents reveal ISIS jihadists personal data,” *Zaman al-Wasl*, March 8, 2016, <https://en.zamanawsl.net/news/article/14541>.

60 Georg Heil, Volkmar Kabisch, and Georg Mascolo, “Bundeskriminalamt im Besitz geheimer IS-Papiere,” *Süddeutscher Zeitung*, March 7, 2016, <https://www.sueddeutsche.de/politik/terrorgefahr-bundeskriminalamt-im-besitz-geheimer-is-papiere-1.2895848>; Ewen MacAskill, “Isis document leak reportedly reveals identities of 22,000 recruits,” *The Guardian*, March 9, 2016, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/mar/09/isis-document-leak-reportedly-reveals-identities-syria-22000-fighters>; Ramsay, “IS Documents Identify Thousands Of Jihadis”; Omar, Engel and Plesser, “Leaked ISIS Personnel Files Paint Picture of Group’s Recruits.”

A few days following these news reports, on March 13, 2016, a journalist from *Buzzfeed News* contacted this author about having received the cache of documents and asked for comment on them.⁶¹ Since *Buzzfeed News* had a policy of not paying for documents such as these, once a number of outlets reported on the topic, the person who was helping sell the documents provided them for free to *Buzzfeed News* since they were already out there.⁶² As part of the process of commenting on the personnel documents, the *Buzzfeed News* journalist shared via Google Drive on that same day 4,312 personnel documents, which included some duplicates. There were 77 countries of citizenship represented in the files.

What's insightful about this data is that it shows that IS's border control infrastructure spanned the Turkish and Syrian border. This clearly illustrates that while IS did not control or claim territory in Turkey, it still manned a vital parastatal point of operations for checking-in individuals and then bringing them into IS's official territory on the Syrian side. Drawing from this author's extensive prior research on the Tunisian foreign fighter cases,⁶³ there were five main stopping points on the Turkish side where Tunisians were either checked-in by IS border control or stayed prior to then being checked-in by IS border control on the Syrian side: Antakya, Reyhanli, Kilis, Gaziantep, and Urfa. Most Tunisians were based in Urfa before heading into Syria since the largest check-ins occurred in Tel Abyad (204), with the next largest batches coming from Reyhanli to Atme (149) and Kilis to A'zaz (122). This makes sense since Tal Abyad is in al-Raqqah governorate, where ISIS and later IS had a stronghold.

When a Tunisian, or anyone for that matter arrived at one of these IS border checkpoints, they had to fill out a form that included detailed information about the individual prior to them being allowed to enter IS territory—in the case of Urfa, Turkey and Tal Abyad, Syria to IS's al Raqqah province. The border form included:

- i. the individual's name,
- ii. their nom de guerre,
- iii. their mother's maiden name,
- iv. their blood type,
- v. date of birth,
- vi. nationality,
- vii. marital status,
- viii. home address,
- ix. level of educational attainment,
- x. level of sharia understanding,
- xi. previous job experience,
- xii. countries the individual traveled through to get to Turkey/Syria,
- xiii. areas they entered Turkey/Syria from (in the case of Wilayat al-Raqqah it would be Urfa, Turkey or Tal Abyad, Syria),

61 Giglio, al-Awad, and Prothero, "Leaked ISIS Documents Tell The Stories Of Hundreds Of Foreign Jihadis."

62 Ibid.

63 Aaron Y. Zelin, "Tunisian Foreign Fighters in Iraq and Syria," Policy Notes 55, *Washington Institute for Near East Policy*, November 28, 2018, <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/tunisian-foreign-fighters-iraq-and-syria>.

- xiv. who recommended the individual (a practice called tazkiya, meaning assurance,
- xv. the date the individual entered into IS territory,
- xvi. what role they will take within IS,
- xvii. prior combat experience,
- xviii. any special skills of note,
- xix. place of work prior to entering IS territory,
- xx. itemized list of things the individual gave to IS in a security deposit,
- xxi. rating one's level of obedience,
- xxii. contact numbers,
- xxiii. date
- xxiv. place of death (to be filled out in the future if/when that happens),
- xxv. and notes.

The detailed nature of the border form revealed that anyone who entered IS territory essentially had a thorough background check. This suggests that, from the first step one took into IS territory, one was aware of IS's meticulous security state and that arriving at its territory was markedly different as compared to border processes that one would ordinarily undergo while traveling into another country. This difference would have been arguably most visible to those foreign fighters from Western countries.

In the notes section of the border form, the group also noted certain skills and experiences that it appears it felt could be exploited for the gain of the organization. For instance, Qa'qa' al-Tunisi was trained in street fighting and kung fu; Abu Musa al-Tunisi had experience in transferring money and importing goods from other countries; Abu Sa'd al-Tunisi worked as a smuggler in Libya and Algeria; Abu Yusuf al-Tunisi knew the Montage Video program and software piracy programs; and Abu Mujahid al-Tunisi was an expert in hacking encrypted sites. This shows that not only were the border documents used as a way to identify those who were coming into IS's territory, but they were also a talent-spotting mechanism, which allowed the group to find personnel that could help in various aspects of IS's state-building enterprise.

Beyond foreigners who passed through IS's border security, on the roads between cities, villages, frontlines with adversarial actors, and pop-up locations, IS manned many internal checkpoints that became the bane of existence for many Syrians. For instance, anti-regime and Alawite activist Samar Yazbeck described IS internal checkpoints from the perspective of a Syrian, "Sometimes waves of anger overpowered me, especially whenever we were stopped at an ISIS checkpoint where all its members were foreigners – from Tunisia, Morocco, Saudi Arabia, Yemen and Chechnya. We were just another bunch of Syrians to them, and this made me feel a pang of rage."⁶⁴ Highlighting that not only did the Islamic State bring a whole set of new rules to follow once it took over territory, it also in some ways changed the demographics as well as power dynamics due to the more than 40,000 foreign fighters that ended up joining IS.

In addition to being a pain for locals in a general sense, these checkpoints were a way for IS to exert its power against those that didn't follow its extreme interpretations of Islamic law. For example, an individual named Bandar from eastern Syria arrived at an IS checkpoint ahead of the Tishrin Dam on the Euphrates River on his way to al-Raqqah governorate, about 9 miles northwest. At this checkpoint, an "ISIS fighter reached toward the bulge created by a pack of cigarettes in [his] shirt pocket and crushed the pack under his feet and started laughing 'Look at what the infidels smoke; these men are worse than infidels, they are apostates. Take them to the jail.'" ⁶⁵ Through its checkpoints, IS was able to easily single out those who did not support it or those who were insufficiently supportive— even those not involved in traditional criminality, but who acted against the group's social mores.

Even if one did make it to IS territory or were local members of the group itself, it would be difficult to escape once there. This was even more so for women, who were restricted from traveling outside IS's territorial control unless there were severe medical reasons. ⁶⁶ And later on, once IS began losing territory in the war against it, it restricted the movement of all civilians from fleeing IS territory to use them as human shields. ⁶⁷

These examples of course are only the tip of the iceberg for the daily humiliations that local Syrians had to endure against IS arbitrary action at checkpoints and in a general sense. Moreover, even if one was a member of IS, local or foreign, a local resident explained that it was much easier to join the group than to leave it: "Abandoning it, as far as the organization was concerned, meant abandoning Islam—for which the penalty was death." Thus, "ISIS hunted defectors." ⁶⁸

So what was it exactly like once one arrived in al-Raqqah? ⁶⁹

Everyday Life Under The Islamic State

One of the key documents to understand its rule is through its *wathiqat al-madinah* (charter of the city), used in Iraq, Syria, Libya, and likely elsewhere. ⁷⁰ It is a sobering read on ISIS's extreme interpretations of Islamic law. Those who steal will have their hands chopped off. Islam's five daily prayers must be performed on time. Drugs, alcohol, and cigarettes are forbidden. There are prohibitions on music, song, and displaying photos in shops. Carrying weapons and non-ISIS flags is illegal. All shrines and graves will be destroyed since they are considered polytheistic. Women must dress modestly (a euphemism for the full-body niqab), as alluded to earlier.

Regarding the latter, a number of ISIS administrative documents outline what this actually means in practice. For example, one in December 2013 states "there will be a complete ban on

65 Rania Abouzeid, *No Turning Back: Life, Loss, and Hope in Wartime Syria*, W.W. Norton & Company: New York, 2018, 512-513.

66 Hamoud al-Mousa, "ISIS prevents women from leaving the territories it controls," *Raqqah Is Being Slaughtered Silently*, March 20, 2015, <https://www.raqqah-sl.com/?p=1129>.

67 "ISIS prevents civilians from fleeing to use them as human shields," *Raqqah Is Being Slaughtered Silently*, June 11, 2015, <https://www.raqqah-sl.com/?p=1592>.

68 Abouzeid, *No Turning Back: Life, Loss, and Hope in Wartime Syria*, 552-553.

69 Aaron Y. Zelin, "46 Scenes From The Islamic State In Syria," *Buzzfeed*, October 12, 2013, <https://www.buzzfeed.com/aaronyzelin/46-scenes-from-the-islamic-state-in-syria-dski>; Aaron Y. Zelin, "The Islamic State of Iraq and Syria Has a Consumer Protection Office," *The Atlantic*, June 13, 2013, <https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2014/06/the-isis-guide-to-building-an-islamic-state/372769>.

70 The Islamic State, "Charter of the City, Second Edition," *Maktabat al-Himmah*, January 25, 2016, <https://jihadology.net/2016/01/25/new-release-from-the-islamic-state-charter-of-the-city-second-edition>.

unveiling, as well as the wearing of tight trousers and cloaks, and the adorning of oneself and imitation of kafir [disbelieving] women. And any woman who contravenes this statement for distribution will expose herself to the severest consequences.”⁷¹ This was further emphasized a month later in another ISIS administrative document, which states “any sister present on the street must embrace Islamic conduct, including: 1. wearing the entire Shari’i hijab composed of: the fluttering abaya, the hijab, the niqab and gloves. 2. no raising the voice in the street. 3. the sister should not walk at a late hour on her own, and similarly she should not walk without her maharim. Every sister violating these codes of conduct will be punished in the street along with the guardian of her affairs after a deadline of three days.”⁷² Also in January 2014, ISIS released an administrative document “prohibiting the sale of songs on disks and musical instruments as well as the playing of songs of amusement in cars, coaches, shops and all places. Similarly we call on all shops to remove photos of men and women from the display of their shops.”⁷³

A different set of administrative documents from late April 2014 addresses the issue of calling for shops to close during prayer time, explaining that “all shop owners must comply with closing their shops on the call to prayer immediately and head to the mosque, and not open them before the passing of 20 minutes from the time of the call to prayer. In the event of any violation after the issuing of this announcement, the violator will be exposed to punishment. And on that the warning has come.”⁷⁴ ISIS similarly put out an administrative circular in early June 2014 about the obligation of fasting during Ramadan and “whoever does not fulfill the conditions is to face the punishments of the law on the subject of lack of fasting during this month.”⁷⁵

ISIS also whipped individuals for insulting their neighbors,⁷⁶ confiscated and destroyed counterfeit medicine,⁷⁷ and on multiple occasions summarily executed and crucified individuals for apostasy or adultery, among other reasons.⁷⁸ For example, ISIS executed eight women on alleged adultery charges on three separate occasions between June and July 2014.⁷⁹ Many of these ISIS criminal penalties occurred in al-Na’im (paradise) square, which locals called “roundabout of hell” in contradistinction to this reality. On one occasion, a witness to one of IS’s amputations told the United Nations Human Rights Council that “One of the people who was standing next to me vomited and passed out due to the horrific scene.”⁸⁰ Bandar, a local resident noted, “Life is black. Everything is black. They kill people in front of children... They have killed life.”⁸¹ He also explained that ISIS sent severed heads to the victims’ parents.⁸²

71 Aymenn al-Tamimi, “Archive of Islamic State Administrative Documents,” January 27, 2015, <https://aymennjawad.org/2015/01/archive-of-islamic-state-administrative-documents>.

72 Aymenn al-Tamimi, “Archive of Islamic State Administrative Documents (cont.),” January 11, 2016, <https://aymennjawad.org/2016/01/archive-of-islamic-state-administrative-documents-1>.

73 al-Tamimi, “Archive of Islamic State Administrative Documents.”

74 Aymenn al-Tamimi, “Archive of Islamic State Administrative Documents (continued...again),” September 17, 2016, <https://aymennjawad.org/2016/09/archive-of-islamic-state-administrative-documents-2>.

75 al-Tamimi, “Archive of Islamic State Administrative Documents.”

76 Zelin, “Road to the Caliphate: May 6-19.”

77 Zelin, “Road to the Caliphate: June 3-9.”

78 Aaron Y. Zelin, “Road to the Caliphate: March 18-24,” *Syrian Jihadism*, March 28, 2024, <https://syrianjihadism.com/2024/03/28/road-to-the-caliphate-march-18-24>.

79 “Rule of Terror: Living under ISIS in Syria,” *United Nations Human Rights Council*, November 19, 2014, https://www.ohchr.org/sites/default/files/documents/hrbodies/hrcouncil/coisyrria/HRC_CRP_ISIS_14Nov2014.pdf.

80 Ibid.

81 Rania Abouzeid, *No Turning Back: Life, Loss, and Hope in Wartime Syria*, W.W. Norton & Company: New York, 2018, 529.

82 Ibid, 537.

ISIS members burned cartons of cigarettes and destroyed shrines and graves, including the famous Uways al-Qarani shrine in al-Raqqah governorate.⁸³ The latter was revered by Shia Muslims. The latter sect also bore the brunt of IS's forced conversions as well as others forcibly being displaced.⁸⁴ On top of this, many Syrian activists from the original revolutionary uprising were kidnapped or killed, per Abu Bakr's original request of Jawlani before the two split. For example, members of the local pro-democracy activist group Haqquna (our right) began to disappear into ISIS's prisons.⁸⁵ Likewise, regarding the aforementioned Saleh, his brothers Ahmad and Firas and a number of his friends were abducted by ISIS beginning in July 2013.⁸⁶ ISIS, at the time, ran seven prisons in al-Raqqah governorate.⁸⁷ This led Saleh to lament while in hiding in al-Raqqah that "it was extremely hard for me to be unable to walk around the city where I spent years of my adolescence, where most of my brothers lived, and where my parents had lived until their deaths, while some religiously-obsessed, enraged Tunisians, Saudis, Egyptians, and Europeans roamed freely, unable to engage in anything other than murder."⁸⁸

These above rules illustrate the harsh realities of life in ISIS territory. But what's often overlooked is that the group also had a soft-power governing strategy that includes social services, such as providing breaks to those at morning prayers in mosques in Tabqa;⁸⁹ religious lectures; and dawa to local populations.⁹⁰ During the period of territorial control, ISIS in Al-Raqqah reached out to local notables and tribal leaders to blunt the backlash that greeted its earlier iteration as the Islamic State of Iraq (ISI) and its harsh interpretation of sharia during the *sahwa* (participants in the Sunni 'Awakening' councils that the U.S. stood up during its troop "surge" against ISI)⁹¹ movement in the mid-to-late 2000s.⁹² On the softer governance side of things, it is worth noting that ISIS also developed health and welfare programs. ISIS helped run bread factories and provided fruits and vegetables to many families, passing the goods out personally.⁹³ In Raqqah, ISIS established a food kitchen to feed the needy and an Office for Orphans to help pair them with families.⁹⁴ ISIS also conducted polio vaccination campaigns in an effort to arrest the disease's spread.⁹⁵

ISIS's bureaucracy typically included an Islamic court system and a roving police force.⁹⁶ In al-Raqqah, they forced shops to close for selling poor products in the suq (market) as well as regular

83 Aaron Y. Zelin, "Road to the Caliphate: March 25-31," *Syrian Jihadism*, March 28, 2024, <https://syrianjihadism.com/2024/03/28/road-to-the-caliphate-march-25-31>; Zelin, "Road to the Caliphate: May 6-19."

84 "Rule of Terror: Living under ISIS in Syria," *United Nations Human Rights Council*, November 19, 2014, https://www.ohchr.org/sites/default/files/documents/hrbodies/hrcouncil/coisyrria/HRC_CRP_ISIS_14Nov2014.pdf.

85 Hisham and Crabapple, *Brothers of the Gun: Memoirs of the Syrian War*, 137-138.

86 Saleh, *Impossible Revolution: Making Sense of the Syrian Tragedy*, 19.

87 Ibid, 242.

88 Ibid, 44.

89 Aaron Y. Zelin, "Road to the Caliphate: August 3-August 25, 2013," *Syrian Jihadism*, August 5, 2023, <https://syrianjihadism.com/2023/08/05/road-to-the-caliphate-august-3-august-25-2013>.

90 Aaron Y. Zelin, "Road to the Caliphate: September 17-29, 2013," *Syrian Jihadism*, September 16, 2023, <https://syrianjihadism.com/2023/09/16/road-to-the-caliphate-september-17-29-2013>.

91 "Q&A: Iraq's Awakening Councils," *BBC*, July 18, 2010, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-10677623>.

92 Aaron Y. Zelin, "Road to the Caliphate: January 29-February 4," *Syrian Jihadism*, January 30, 2024, <https://syrianjihadism.com/2024/01/30/road-to-the-caliphate-january-29-february-4>; Aaron Y. Zelin, "Road to the Caliphate: March 4-10," *Syrian Jihadism*, March 1, 2024, <https://syrianjihadism.com/2024/03/01/road-to-the-caliphate-march-4-10>.

93 See, for example, <https://web.archive.org/web/20140614043250/https://pbs.twimg.com/media/BJz4ErCUAEX9lp.jpg:large>.

94 Zelin, "Road to the Caliphate: May 6-19."

95 Zelin, "Road to the Caliphate: January 29-February 4."

96 Aaron Y. Zelin, "Road to the Caliphate: June 3-9," *Syrian Jihadism*, June 3, 2024, <https://syrianjihadism.com/2024/06/03/road-to-the-caliphate-june-3-9>.

supermarkets and kebab stands—a move that was likely the work of its Consumer Protection Authority office.⁹⁷ ISIS also invested in public works. In April 2014, for instance, it completed a new suq in al-Raqqah for locals to exchange goods.⁹⁸ Additionally, the group ran an electricity office that monitored electricity-use levels,⁹⁹ installed new power lines; and hosted workshops on how to repair old ones. ISIS fixed underground water pipes;¹⁰⁰ bussed people between the territories they controlled (while also enforcing gender segregation on them);¹⁰¹ rehabilitated blighted medians to make roads more aesthetically pleasing; and operated a post office and zakat office (which the group claimed helped farmers with their harvests).¹⁰²

While these governance and social services existed, they do not obscure ISIS's repression and deadly violence, as described earlier in the paper. Moreover, their governance efforts were often flawed. The Raqqan citizen-led journalistic group, *Raqqah Is Being Slaughtered Silently*, exposed the gap/ chasm between the reality of daily life as compared to IS's narrative in its propaganda. For example, in the town of Ain Issa in Raqqah governorate, there were rolling power outages throughout February 2015. This then created another crisis, namely extracting water from wells that depended on electric power, which led to water cuts and shortages for weeks.¹⁰³ IS at times would be able to redirect electricity to its prison system to use on detained individuals as part of their torture process instead of Raqqans having access to it in their homes.¹⁰⁴

Furthermore, even though IS did initiate the running of bread factories and local ovens, the prices of bread continued to go up over time.¹⁰⁵ Similarly, IS began to privatize hospitals, which had originally been free. In particular, this was seen in hospitals and clinics in the town of Tal Abyad in Raqqah governorate in mid-March 2015.¹⁰⁶ Beyond basic needs, their views on gender segregation also limited services in other sectors as well, such as restrictions on women going to the dentist for example.¹⁰⁷ In other ways, they threatened the health of everyone

97 Aaron Y. Zelin, "Road to the Caliphate: May 6-19," *Syrian Jihadism*, May 3, 2024, <https://syrianjihadism.com/2024/05/03/road-to-the-caliphate-may-6-19>; Aaron Y. Zelin, "Road to the Caliphate: May 27-June 2," *Syrian Jihadism*, May 27, 2024, <https://syrianjihadism.com/2024/05/27/road-to-the-caliphate-may-27-june-2>.

98 Aaron Y. Zelin, "Road to the Caliphate: April 15-21," *Syrian Jihadism*, April 16, 2024, <https://syrianjihadism.com/2024/04/16/road-to-the-caliphate-april-15-21>.

99 Aaron Y. Zelin, "Road to the Caliphate: April 22-28," *Syrian Jihadism*, April 20, 2024, <https://syrianjihadism.com/2024/04/20/road-to-the-caliphate-april-22-28>.

100 Zelin, "Road to the Caliphate: January 29-February 4."

101 Aaron Y. Zelin, "Road to the Caliphate: December 15-January 2," *Syrian Jihadism*, December 24, 2023, <https://syrianjihadism.com/2023/12/24/road-to-the-caliphate-december-15-january-2>; Aaron Y. Zelin, "Road to the Caliphate: February 12-18," *Syrian Jihadism*, February 14, 2024, <https://syrianjihadism.com/2024/02/14/road-to-the-caliphate-february-12-18>.

102 Zelin, "Road to the Caliphate: May 6-19;" Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham, "Islamic State Report #2," *al-Hayat Media Center*, June 7, 2014, <https://jihadology.net/2014/06/07/al-%E1%B8%A5ayat-media-center-presents-a-new-issue-of-the-islamic-state-of-iraq-and-al-shams-magazine-islamic-state-report-2>.

103 Hamoud al-Mousa, "Crises in Ain Issa area and ISIS increases the price of bread," *Raqqah Is Being Slaughtered Silently*, February 2, 2015, <https://www.raqqah-sl.com/?p=749>.

104 "ISIS uses electricity to torture detainees," *Raqqah Is Being Slaughtered Silently*, February 3, 2015, <https://www.raqqah-sl.com/?p=756>.

105 Hamoud al-Mousa, "ISIS fights civilians with a loaf of bread and raises its price," *Raqqah Is Being Slaughtered Silently*, February 17, 2015, <https://www.raqqah-sl.com/?p=865>.

106 "The health sector is a new victim of the 'ISIS' economy in Tal Abyad," *Raqqah Is Being Slaughtered Silently*, March 12, 2015, <https://www.raqqah-sl.com/?p=1038>.

107 "ISIS prevents dentists from treating women," *Raqqah Is Being Slaughtered Silently*, April 18, 2015, <https://www.raqqah-sl.com/?p=1267>.

when they stopped sterilizing the drinking water in June 2015.¹⁰⁸ All of this shows how life under IS may have begun as more cheery and seemingly better than the Assad regime, but it only made local residents' lives more difficult and harder to afford over time.

As a consequence of these hardships and the reality being different from the propaganda, IS invested heavily in its local information operations to try and change the narrative. When one drove in the cities and villages it controlled, there were two things one would notice right away: billboards promoting the group's ideology and media points (*nuqat i'lamiyya*). The latter consists of a stationary stall, a small shack, or a roving car or Winnebago that distributed printed, CDs/DVDs, and/or USB drives of IS media products to locals, with a target audience mainly composed of children and young teenagers. The stationary media points would also provide a space to show its propaganda videos to an audience since they may not have access to the Internet in the same way a location not in the midst of a war might have.

IS also enforced different bans on the Internet and satellite dishes at varying points in an effort to control the flow of information in and out of the caliphate. For example, IS's Diwan al-Hisbah released a statement in early December 2015 banning Internet devices and television sets in all areas under the organization's control.¹⁰⁹ This was implemented further in late March 2016 when IS created a brochure titled "Why Should I Destroy the Satellite Dish?,"¹¹⁰ which they promoted by passing them out to local residents in April.¹¹¹ In June 2016, IS released a video showing residents turning in their satellite devices for the Diwan al-Hisbah.¹¹² Once the Diwan al-Hisbah received someone's satellite, they would give a receipt so that the Hisbah officials wouldn't harass the owner in the future.¹¹³ IS went so far to directly remove individuals' satellite receivers from their roofs in mid-July 2016 since not everyone heeded IS's original call.¹¹⁴

Similarly, IS began to implement a number of rules related to Internet access, especially with Internet cafes to make it more difficult for residents in IS territory to have independent sources of information beyond IS's messaging. In mid-July 2015, IS's general security (al-amn al-'am) released a notice to Internet cafe owners in al-Raqqah that stated to "1. remove WiFi satellite connections dependent on Internet shops and private connections even for soldiers of the Islamic State, limiting network connection to within the shop only and 2. go and register with the reception office located in the garden opposite the municipal stadium. The deadline for removing and registering is four days only from the date of this statement and all who violate this will be held accountable."¹¹⁵ This was followed up on the same day with a directive from IS's general security for Internet cafe owners to record the IDs of users at their places of

108 "ISIS Stops Sterilizing Drinking Water, Threatens New Epidemics," *Raqqah Is Being Slaughtered Silently*, June 7, 2015, <https://www.raqqah-sl.com/?p=1579>.

109 See here: https://x.com/Raqqah_SL/status/676814328159277056.

110 The Islamic State, "Why Should I Destroy the Satellite?," *Maktabat al-Himmah*, March 27, 2016, <https://jihadology.net/2016/03/28/new-dawah-literature-from-the-islamic-state-why-should-i-destroy-the-satellite>.

111 The Islamic State, "Distributing brochures - Why do I have to destroy the satellite dish?," *Wilayat al-Raqqah Media Office*, April 20, 2016. Author retains a copy in his archive.

112 The Islamic State, "The people of the city of al-Raqqah delivered satellite receivers to the al-Hisbah Center," *Wi-Kallat Amaq al-Ikhbariyah*, June 10, 2016. Author retains a copy in his archive.

113 Author retains a copy of the receipt in his archive.

114 The Islamic State, "al-Raqqah: Satellite receivers were removed from the roofs of buildings by Hisbah men and volunteers," *Wi-Kallat Amaq al-Ikhbariyah*, July 17, 2016. Author retains a copy in his archive.

115 al-Tamimi, "Archive of Islamic State Administrative Documents."

business.¹¹⁶ This allowed IS to then track the browsing habits of residents, which they deem might go against their worldview or seeking to find those potentially leaking information about them online.

This went even further in August 2015 when IS banned WiFi in Tabqa, a city 36 miles southwest of al-Raqqah within the province.¹¹⁷ Moreover, in October 2015, IS began tightening the screws on Internet cafe owners to further control the information space by first establishing a vetting process for opening new Internet cafes and then establishing a license to have for each owner's Internet cafe if he passes the vetting process.¹¹⁸ And if one did not have a license and was still trying to operate an Internet cafe, IS would close it down. All of this goes to show how important it was for IS to control the information space locally within al-Raqqah province (as well as in other provinces too), eventually banning its fighters from even using social media in mid-May 2017.¹¹⁹

Returning to IS's billboard campaign, the messages sought to reinforce the ideas IS hoped to ingrain within society and for it to become second nature. To get a better sense of this messaging, here are a number of examples of typical types of slogans and ideas that IS hoped to permeate society with via its billboards that were put up in cities and villages in Wilayat al-Raqqah:¹²⁰

- "The Caliphate Upon the Prophetic Methodology (manhaj)"
- A message to "a brother mujahid" on the importance of patience (*sabr*)
- About the alleged realities on the ground in IS's caliphate: "Here is the Abode of Islam. Here is the Land of the Caliphate. Here [the ideas of] al-wala' wa-l-bara' (loyalty to the Muslims and disavowal to the unbelievers) [stand]. Here is the market of Jihad. Here is the winds of paradise. Here is the glory. Here is the dignity."
- "My hijab is my glory"
- "Fight them until no more fitna and religion is God's alone" [a reference to multiple verses that repeat the same thing in the Qur'an]
- "People of jihad in al-Sham, unite your ranks under [one] banner—no deity, but God"
- "This is the freedom we want"
- "We are here for your security and protection: so be cooperative with us"

There was pushback to this locally though, with different civil activists spray painting anti-IS graffiti such as "Down with al-Baghdadi" and the "The state of hypocrisy."¹²¹

IS began to publicize its creation of its media points within al-Raqqah in mid-May 2014, about a month prior to the announcement of IS's caliphate.¹²² At the time, they originally branded these media points as being run by IS's al-I'tisam Media.¹²³ They continued to build these out

116 Ibid.

117 Ibid.

118 Ibid.

119 al-Tamimi, "Archive of Islamic State Administrative Documents (continued...again)."

120 The Islamic State, "Da'wah Billboards and Signs in the Streets of the City al-Bab," *Wilayat Halab Media Office*, April 18, 2015, https://twitter.com/news_ommah_/status/589506628837212161. The author retains an archived version; IS-Wilayat al-Raqqah Propaganda Database, created by Aaron Y. Zelin, last updated May 17, 2024.

121 Aaron Y. Zelin, "Road to the Caliphate: February 26-March 3," *Syrian Jihadism*, February 23, 2014, <https://syrianjihadism.com/2024/02/23/road-to-the-caliphate-february-26-march-3>.

122 Zelin, "Road to the Caliphate: May 6-19."

123 See: <https://jihadology.net/category/al-iti%e1%b9%a3am-media>.

after the caliphate announcement, but dropped the al-I'tisam Media branding and just stood on their own as “media points.”¹²⁴ According to IS media operative, Abu ‘Umar al-Muhajir, they had an “urgent need” for media information locally, but lacked a means of transmitting it within IS-ruled areas other than with CDs.¹²⁵ However, CDs were unhelpful in Syria because they lacked CD production equipment and CDs were not frequently used in the smart-phone era.¹²⁶ Therefore, the “media points” “became one of the bases of internal media in a range of the Caliphate’s provinces.”¹²⁷ According to another IS media figure in al-Raqqah, Abu al-Bara’ al-Furati, IS had a number of archives in the “media points,” which also included propaganda in multiple languages, including Arabic, English, French, Kurdish, Turkish, Farsi, Bengali, and others.¹²⁸ Highlighting that these “media points” were not only directed at local audiences, but for the benefit of the foreign fighter cadre as well. Likewise, Abu Tim al-Ansari, who ran the “media point” in al-Dilah roundabout in the Mansur neighborhood of al-Raqqah, stated that the best characteristics they were looking for to work at these “media points” was someone with patience and a people person.¹²⁹

As of early March 2016, the aforementioned Abu al-Bara’ noted that al-Raqqah governorate contained 25 “media points,” with six within al-Raqqah city.¹³⁰ This illustrated how much they spread beyond larger cities, too, with IS opening a new media point in the town of Hazima, for example, which has a population of at least 10,000 individuals.¹³¹ This underlined how ISIS could control the information environment, even in a location that small. These efforts to control the information space did not wane even as IS’s control of al-Raqqah extended over multiple years: IS continued to promote the creation of new “media points” in mid-March 2016 and as late as April 2017, just months before the fall of IS’s territorial control over al-Raqqah.¹³²

In Islamic State pictorial propaganda, it also promoted specific videos that it would show audiences at their different “media points” locally.¹³³ For example, in late August 2015, IS screened its propaganda video “The Rise of the Caliphate and the Return of the Gold Dinar” and “And God And His Messenger Spoke The Truth” in late April 2017; both in al-Raqqah city.¹³⁴

In some ways, this was a bit meta, considering the original delivery of the videos were first posted online for a global audience, while they then showed both videos to locals at these

124 Islamic State, “One of the media points spread in Wilayat al-Raqqah,” *Wilayat al-Raqqah Media Office*, July 23, 2014. Author retains a copy in his archive.

125 The Islamic State, “Window Into the Media of the Islamic State,” *al-Naba’ Magazine*, March 8, 2016, 12-13, <https://jihadology.net/2016/03/08/new-issue-of-the-islamic-states-newsletter-al-naba-21>.

126 Ibid.

127 Ibid.

128 Ibid.

129 Ibid.

130 Ibid.

131 The Islamic State, “Opening a media point in the Hazima region, northern Wilayat al-Raqqah,” *Wilayat al-Raqqah Media Office*, May 9, 2015. Author retains a copy in his archive.

132 The Islamic State, “Coverage of the work of developing a media point,” *Wilayat al-Raqqah Media Office*, March 13, 2016; The Islamic State, “Coverage of the work of the media point in al-Raqqah city,” *Wilayat al-Raqqah Media Office*, April 19, 2017. Author retains copies in his archive.

133 The Islamic State, “Watching the release of “The Rise of the Caliphate and the Return of the Gold Dinar” at one of the media points in the city of al-Raqqah,” *Wilayat al-Raqqah Media Office*, August 30, 2015; The Islamic State, “Displaying the publication of (And God And His Messenger Spoke The Truth) at media points in the city of al-Raqqah,” *Wilayat al-Raqqah Media Office*, April 23, 2017. Author retains copies in his archive.

134 The Islamic State, “The Rise of the Caliphate and the Return of the Gold Dinar,” *al-Hayat Media Center*, August 29, 2015, <https://jihadology.net/2015/08/29/al-%e1%b8%a5ayat-media-center-presents-a-new-video-message-from-the-islamic-state-the-rise-of-the-caliphate-and-the-return-of-the-gold-dinar>; The Islamic State, “And God And His Messenger Spoke The Truth,” *Wilayat al-Raqqah Media Office*, April 22, 2017, <https://jihadology.net/2017/04/22/new-video-message-from-the-islamic-state-and-god-and-his-messenger-spoke-the-truth-wilayat-al-raqqah>.

“media points,” while taking pictures of this happening locally, and then posting these events online. This highlighted that IS’s information campaign combines traditional and online methods that are married together to reinforce one another.

Beyond the specifics of its control of the information space, ISIS also established a number of religious schools for children, including ones for girls where they can memorize the Quran and receive certificates if successful,¹³⁵ while also holding “fun days” for kids replete with ice cream and inflatable slides.¹³⁶ IS viewed those children as the “Generation of the Caliphate” that would help establish and succeed in its goal of creating a multi-generational project for its Islamic State. The purpose for those under fifteen was therefore to learn IS’s creed and worldview. For their older counterparts, ISIS established training sessions for new imams and preachers.¹³⁷ Schedules for prayers and Quranic lessons were posted at mosques. Yet ISIS also ran training camps for “cub scouts” and housed these recruits in the group’s facilities.¹³⁸ Those boys who were over sixteen joined military training camps, which provided more fighters to ISIS’s fighting force, even if they would be considered child soldiers. However, over time, IS began forcible recruitment and compulsory conscription of locals since many began to see through the veneer of the reality of the group as its failings piled up and there was more external pressure against it.¹³⁹

Although ISIS claimed to have a dividing line between ages who worked with the group and those who did not, there is documentation that children under the ages of fifteen would also be involved in military training camps.¹⁴⁰ A video IS released from al-Raqqah in June 2015 showed a military training camp for children, dubbing it the “Cubs of the Caliphate.” In the video, one can see children, likely between the ages of eight and twelve, crawling fast on the ground under barbed wire, shooting handguns and AK-47s, climbing up and down large fences, and doing military marches, among other activities. In the video, the Kalashnikovs were taller than the kids when held up vertically. They also had to practice speeches for intimidating Islamic State enemies. While this paper could quote these children in this video or in other interview contexts, it is difficult to judge the sincerity in any of their words or the true impact of the group’s indoctrination efforts, since it is likely they were coerced into these actions by adults and thus not necessarily representative. These military training camps allegedly had in some cases up to 350 children each.¹⁴¹

A Vice News documentary on life in al-Raqqah noted that children were the only ones when they filmed that unannounced would say hello and would also blow kisses the filming crew’s way.¹⁴² Showcasing a level of innocence still even amongst IS’s broader machinery of life. Nevertheless, the purpose of all of this from IS’s perspective was to militarize society at a young age so that children would be groomed to follow in the adults’ footsteps.

135 Zelin, “Road to the Caliphate: May 6-19;” Aaron Y. Zelin, “Road to the Caliphate: April 1-7,” *Syrian Jihadism*, March 28, 2024, <https://syrianjihadism.com/2024/03/28/road-to-the-caliphate-april-1-7>; Zelin, “Road to the Caliphate: March 18-24.”

136 See, for example: <https://web.archive.org/web/20140616143102/https://pbs.twimg.com/media/BoVWpZCQAAm5NL.jpg>.

137 Zelin, “Road to the Caliphate: May 27-June 2.”

138 See, for example: https://web.archive.org/web/20140616143103/https://pbs.twimg.com/media/BjTs6l_CEAAKedo.jpg; Zelin, “Road to the Caliphate: May 27-June 2.”

139 “Signs of forced recruitment in Raqqa,” *Raqqa Is Being Slaughtered Silently*, October 15, 2015, <https://www.raqqa-sl.com/?p=2092>; “ISIS imposes compulsory recruitment in Raqqa... and the battle of breaking the bones approaches,” *Raqqa Is Being Slaughtered Silently*, November 15, 2015, https://www.raqqa-sl.com/?attachment_id=2221.

140 The Islamic State, “Cubs of the Caliphate, Wilāyat al-Raqqah Media Office, June 15, 2015, <https://jihadology.net/2015/06/15/new-video-message-from-the-islamic-state-cubs-of-the-caliphate-wilayat-al-raqqah>.

141 “Rule of Terror: Living under ISIS in Syria,” *United Nations Human Rights Council*, November 19, 2014, https://www.ohchr.org/sites/default/files/documents/hrbodies/hrcouncil/coisyrria/HRC_CRP_ISIS_14Nov2014.pdf.

142 “Grooming Children for Jihad: The Islamic State,” *Vice News*, August 8, 2014, https://youtu.be/jzCAPJDAnQA?si=22YZU8zB2SVn6sE_.



Of course, all of these efforts eventually came to naught in the end as the group eventually lost its territory in al-Raqqah in the fall of 2017, and the remainder of its territory in Syria in Deir al-Zour governorate by March 2019. Many of the men, women, and children—local and foreign—who did not die or did not flee back home, remain either detained at prisons or held at various IDP camps in northeast Syria. This provides potential spaces out of which a resurgent Islamic State may choose to break them out of in the future, thus restarting this whole process again of its multi-generational Caliphate project.

Conclusion

Based on this case study of the Islamic State's totalitarian style of governance, whereby it tried to monopolize rules on all aspects of life, it was nearly impossible for anyone living under its rule not to have been exposed to the cruel realities of it or somehow been involved within it since IS-controlled all aspects of life. Regardless of different individuals having different levels of membership or connection to it, everyone had to live within this system set up by IS. Therefore, those being repatriated or put on trial in Europe or in other contexts cannot claim ignorance. Thus, even if one does not necessarily have direct forensic evidence of a specific action taken by a particular individual, it would be very difficult to deny the reality painted by this case study on IS's Wilayat al-Raqqah. It should be reiterated that although this only focused on the Raqqa region, IS carbon-copied this way of ruling to the other provinces it controlled and managed in Iraq and Syria. Therefore, anyone who went to join up with the group would be implicated on some level in the harsh and brutal nature of local life in IS's Wilayat al-Raqqah.

What type of legal tools to bring such potential individuals to justice is beyond my specialty or background, yet this case study illustrates that claiming ignorance of daily life or just noting one was only involved in a particular aspect of IS activity belies the fact that IS's governance model and the way they ruled was all-encompassing.



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