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The Islamic State's notion of "mobile" sovereignty/territoriality in a post-secular perspective

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In the recent decades, there is a growing re-emergence of religion in the public sphere, questioning the secularization theory and challenging the Westphalian state notions, such as the exile of religion to the private sphere and the predominance of the secular/rational over faith and cognition over experience. It is no coincidence that the Treaty of Westphalia, which brought the subordination of religion to the state and brought religious wars to an end, was the same treaty that established the territorial state as the basic unit of the international system (Okhonmina, 2010: 117). The Westphalian system of nation-states was the remedy for religious strife and upheavals that had devastated Europe, and the secularization process, which is placing religion clearly in the private realm, was essential for international politics (Mavelli & Petito, 2012: 933). For a secular state, the first priority is to establish territoriality, that is to homogenize its realm by ostracizing religion and religious (often transnational) communitarianism from the public space. This notion of the Westphalian state is a foreign idea to Islam, which came to the Middle East as a consequence of the 19th-century Westernization process.

The re-emergence of religion in the public sphere has sparked a twofold debate on the post-secular. It refers to the problematic "that emerges when scholars begin to see that the secularization theory fails to make sense of the role that religion actually plays in the modern world" (Schewel, 2014: 49). It also refers to the processes to overcome the dichotomy between the realm of immanence and the realm of the religious transcendence.

This second debate on the post-secular and post-secularism presupposes a Western secular vantage point, arguing that modern secular reason is self-contained and wholly intelligible whereas religious truths are reasonable only to the extent that they are translatable to secular universally accepted principles (Dallmayr, 2012: 965). It also has a normative character insofar as it envisages post-secularism opening space "for the readiness in the West to address its injustices excused by belligerent secularism." In other words, post-secularism is coming to rectify and not change secular Western worldviews or replace a system of rule with another (Barbato, 2012: 1092, 1097). The state should remain neutral towards strife between religious groups that is to remain

secular, whereas religious traditions, particularly its moral intuitions, should not question the separation of church and state (Pabst, 2012: 1004). Religious traditions could participate in the public debate, as long as the institutionalized decision-making process is separated from the informal flows of political communication in this debate (Habermas, 2008: 28). This notion of post-secular, Pabst has argued, "perpetuates the idea that religion is subordinate to the political authority of national states and one among many equally valid voices within the nascent cosmopolitan public square" (Pabst, 2012: 1004). It, moreover, locks International Relations (IR) into the logic of Western secularism, rendering the religious side of IR marginal (Pabst, 2012: 1009).

Examining post-secular requires an agreement on what is secular and secularism. Taylor (2007: 1–3) argues that secularity is characterized, first, by the freedom of the state from any connection or guarantee by some faith or adherence to God. He adds that another understanding is "emptying religion from autonomous social spheres of activity," economic, political, professional and cultural. This, he (2007: 2) argues, could be compatible with a vast majority of people still believing in God and practising their religion, particularly when secularism is a top-down process imposed by authoritarian states, as in the case of the post-colonial Arab regimes.

In the 20th century, territorial states in the Middle East were imposed by colonial powers, accompanied by a top-down secularization process, which tried to impose a nation-state homogenization, to force religion into the private realm and to bring Islamic institutions under state control. Early Arab nationalists, particularly in Iraq and Syria, claimed that a common language and history, rather than religion, were the foundations of a nation's formation (Simon, 1997: 90). Religion, Islam in particular, was a mere component of the larger national culture and a glorious period of the common historical past. Territorial states became both the agents and the objects of secular nationalism in the Middle East (Gershoni & Jankowski, 1997: xx).

In the case of the Islamic worldview of territoriality/sovereignty, the community of the faithful, rather than the state, is in the focus of Islamic doctrine. War is waged between groups of people: between the community of the faithful (*ummah*) and the world of the non-believers, *Dar al-Harb* (Tibi, 1996: 188–189). However, the emergence of the caliphate, the need to safeguard its realm from mightier empires and internal frictions and/or incapability of launching jihad created the principles of the interest of the Islamic state and of war for safeguarding the frontiers, which significantly influence the Islamic notion of territoriality (Parvin & Sommer, 1980: 13).

The Ottoman Empire was never based on the Western secular notion of a nation-state structure imposing homogeneity but, rather, was a mosaic of different confessions, ethnicities and loyalties, often overlapping each other and flowing across boundaries. The territorial states, created by the colonial powers, never managed to replace this mosaic of different confessions and loyalties with genuine nationsate homogeneity and could not resolve the basic contradiction between a socio-political and scientific education based on secular assumptions and an everyday life based on the Islamic religious assumptions. Moreover, as Crooke (2015) notes, these states "lacked the national 'homogeneity' that would permit a 'social contract' between governors and governed to be agreed, and as a consequence, the whole 'Arab system' has fallen into popular discredit."

The post–Cold War quasi-unipolar international system was held responsible for the collapse

of the state of Iraq, resulting in the ongoing social and economic devastation of the country and the destabilization of the geostrategic heart of the region. It was held, also, responsible for the still unresolved Arab–Israeli conflict and the Israeli occupation of the Palestinian Territories. Also, the project of establishing quasi-secular/rational states, such as Egypt, Syria, Iraq and Algeria, on the boundaries set by the colonial powers, reached its limits and lost its legitimacy among the people, whose primary demand for dignity presents a crisis not only economic and social but also cultural and ethical.

All these developments led to a "Sunni crisis," as the Sunni Muslim communities felt marginalized and alienated from power. They, consequently, felt to be drawn into a politics of incoherence.[1] The "Islamic State" (IS) appeared as a "corrective" force of this socio-political incoherence, and it is not a coincidence that it made use of the teachings of early Muslim thinkers, such as Ibn Tayymiya, who taught in the time of the Mughal invasions (Crooke, 2015). The IS is a hybrid jihadist organization borrowing and incorporating strategic and ideological elements from al-Qaeda, Hezbollah and the governing structures of the Taliban and the Ba'athist Iraq (Khatib, 2015: 3). It has been influenced by a hybrid ideology combining the main elements of Salafism and the Muslim Brotherhood's political Islam (Hassan, 2016). It came to challenge the Westphalian international order, through its attack on the state territoriality, as a man-made attribute of the state that cannot be taken as sacrosanct, particularly when it is contrary to God's will and to the advancement of true and pure Islamic rule. Thus, there is a notion of "mobile territoriality" according to a divine plan rather than based on the secular/rational assumptions of the Westphalian state.

However, by negating the secular, IS has never abandoned the rationality of the secular state. The experience of God and rationality are not in binary positions. The re-emergence of religion as sovereignty and territoriality marker is not a neo-traditional falling back to the periods of the first caliphs but has been largely informed by modern Arab states' context of politics. We are trying to expose this endeavour in the most significant aspects of state-in-war, such as military strategy, command-and-control structures, wartime bureaucracy and expansion strategies.

The chapter questions Habermasian Western vantage-point views of post-secularism as a normative problem-solving process, which would lead to an irenic inclusion of religion as a viable perspective in building a healthy Western society. It also questions essentialist understandings of the relationship between religion and politics that attempt to detach the definition of this relationship from the social, historical and cultural processes that produce it.

Regardless of how the IS fares militarily and politically in the printing time of this chapter, its ideology, strategy and model of "state-building" will remain a persisting challenge. The IS signalled a paradigm change in the jihadist movement's strategy. The IS's hybrid state is perhaps the first model of transnational state organization for the jihadi movement. Until the creation of the "caliphate," the jihadi movement had a global jihad strategy, exemplified by the al-Qaeda-type network organization. Moreover, in a global context, it leads to the reconceptualization of the "new medievalism" debate regarding international organization, in other words, "a system of overlapping authority and multiple loyalty, held together by a duality of competing universalistic claims" (Friedrichs, 2001: 475–501).

The Islamic State and post-secularity

Prima facie, the IS appears "textually rigorous and deeply rooted in a pre-modern theological tradition" (Bunzel, 2015: 7). The IS is, indeed, confident in its anticipation of the apocalypse, and it is equally confident in its divinely assigned role of a vanguard (or frontline state) preparing the ground for the "final battle," which will seal the global dominion of Islam and spur the "End of Times."[2] However, the IS is not merely an apocalyptic/eschatological organization, but it also ascribes to a deeply millenarian project as well (Berger, 2015). According to the IS's interpretation of the divine plan and in line with the "prophetic methodology," the core prerequisite for the divine revelation is the victory of the (narrowly defined) "righteous" Muslims against the "Crusader" and apostate forces and the *pre-destined* reunification of the *ummah. Ummah*, as a utopian society in the making, assumes the role of carrier for a project of *revolutionary* rearrangement of socio-political relations, locally and internationally.

Although revolutionary in nature, the IS carries the exact same *old-world* features it wants to eradicate. Established in reaction to the flaws of the current system and its constituents (secularism, nation-state and insatiable capitalism), The IS, below the surface of eschatological discourse, rests on foundations deeply rooted in the very modernity it rejects in abhorrence. In this sense, the IS employs the "conveniences" and builds on the remnants of the secular world it aspires to eliminate. In the words of the former IS spokesman, Abu Mousa, "[w]e are not sending people back to the time of the carrier pigeon… On the contrary, we will benefit from development. But in a way that doesn't contradict the religion" (Atran, 2015).

This symbiosis between secular and religious, rationality and belief, cognition and lived experience is not restricted to the propaganda level (serving a conceptual bridge from the old to the new world). On the contrary, this post-secular coexistence is replicated on every level of the IS's concrete strategy to dominate the world: military conquest, administrative consolidation and territorial expansion.

Military strategy of conquest

Under the surface of religiously sanctioned violence and conquest of holy territories, the military strategy of the IS seemed to rest on known military paradigms, as distinct as the Bedouin fighting mode (DeAtkine, 2015) and strategic cultures linked to Genghis Khan, Hitler, Lenin, Mao and the US (Anderson, 2014). The organization that had until recently claimed to run a state across large swaths of territory in Syria and Iraq was close to extinction, in 2010, when Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi took the reins. In the past few years, it progressed from an organization on the run (with a military repertoire limited to suicide attacks and occasional gunfights) to an offensive military force capable of complex operations. With the expansion into Syria and the 2013 spring merger into a single organization called the "Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham" (ISIS), IS forces manifested a capacity to operate on a theatre-level, as well.

Over these years and despite the recent military setbacks, the IS had mastered manoeuvre warfare while demonstrating a capability for advanced coordination and mobility and evidence of increasing regularization as a military force. The transition from a guerrilla (terrorist) force to an organized army requires widespread reforms and fast institutional learning to be sustainable. The IS appeared to progress successfully on both accounts. Since 2013, the IS had demonstrated a re-centralized command-and-control system that allowed local initiative at the execution level (Knights, 2014). This upgraded command structure resulted in a faster – and steady – tempo of attacks (Wyer, 2012) – coordinated over time and space – and a richer repertoire of attack types (Bilger, 2014). Furthermore, the increasing use of probes, feints and diversion tactics and the relatively smooth tactical incorporation of armoured vehicles and artillery (Knights, 2014), revealed deeper knowledge of professional army requirements. Beyond the narrow military aspect, managing a large semi-professional military force goes hand-in-hand with bureaucratization that *rationalizes* the command-and-control system. The IS developed a rigorous system of file keeping, as documents seized in Sinjar, Bilawi and elsewhere demonstrate (Felter & Fishman, 2007; Jung et al., 2014; Chulov, 2014). From simple personnel rosters to rigorous financial supervision and anti-corruption measures, these files reveal a complex bureaucratic mechanism.

The short period, during which these changes took place, and the fact that they occurred while the IS was *on the move*, has given rise to allegations of former Ba'athist officers' imprint. Indeed, IS manifested a good understanding of the Iraq belt system, with roots in Saddam Hussein's Baghdad defence design (Lewis, 2015). Likewise, Ba'athist influences can be found in the IS's tactical repertoire, such as the widespread use of "Suicide Vehicle Borne Improvised Explosive Devices," as a substitute for artillery, particularly at the outset of an offensive (Barfi, 2016). The Ba'athist footprint in the spectacular military transformation of the IS has been widely debated. The Shia Iraqi establishment has been a strong supporter of the theory of an alleged Ba'athist hand in IS's creation and success (ICG, 2014: 5; Sly, 2015). Western media have been also particularly fond of the Ba'athist conspiracy theory (Reuter, 2015).

Despite its elegance, the master plan of a Ba'athist takeover seems dubious. On one hand, there are still groups within the Sunni insurgency that represent purely Ba'athist ideas (e.g. Jaysh Rijal al-Tariqa al-Naqshbandia [JRTN]), even though currently they are largely irrelevant in military terms. On the other hand, the presence of former Ba'athists in IS ranks, although undisputable, is not a particularly novel phenomenon (Caillet, 2015; Tønnessen, 2015: 55–57). Most important, instead of plotting their return, they were fully incorporated in the IS vision. Some are products of Saddam Hussein's "Faith Campaign" in the 1990s that hatched a generation of *Islamized* military officers, but most of the IS's former Ba'athist personnel, in fact, constitute a new generation who had minimal contact with either Ba'athist or Islamic ideas before 2003 (Tønnessen, 2015: 53). Products of Ba'athist patronage system rather than its beliefs, they fell victims of post-2003 de-Ba'athification and subsequent unemployment. Some briefly fought against the US with Ba'athist or Sunni groups, and devoid of any strong connection to Ba'athism, they became easy prey for Islamists in the prisons they were both kept (Tønnessen, 2015: 50).

In any case, the Ba'athist angle and the "conventionality" this implies tend to downplay the hybridity of the IS's military profile. IS moves with ease across a wide spectrum of fighting *styles* (from terrorism to guerrilla warfare to semi- conventional war). As such, it equally benefits from lessons and accumulated know-how from the Iraqi and foreign (Chechen) insurgencies (Barfi, 2016). Technically an insurgency version of the "Clear, Hold, Build" COIN strategy[3] (Bilger, 2014), The IS's plan of subversion, consolidation and expansion is a carefully crafted phased strategy, where the secular becomes translatable through the religious. The first step consists of vigorous intelligence collection and gradual encroachment, with "benign" *da'awa* offices often playing the role of battering ram. Next, with the help of the collected intelligence, the earned goodwill of the population and tactical alliances with tribes and militant groups, the IS forces "clear" the area from hostile elements and competitors, gradually establish a military presence and, ultimately, control over territory and population (Al-Tamimi, 2015a).

Undoubtedly, this whole enterprise was dressed in notions of imminent apocalypse. However, under the surface, the unholy alliances, the elimination of religious and political opponents and the ethno-sectarian cleansing were conceived and executed with – selective – population homogenization in mind. Cleared of all corruptive or unwanted elements, the remaining population was stripped to its sectarian-religious identity, rendering it more mixable with the foreign Muslims that settle in the new state. In this sense, IS military strategy employed outward and inward migration as a means to *construct* a population for its authority. This socially engineered population, consisting of fighters and "civilian citizens" (a distinction that IS largely disavows), did not seek "martyrhood," as a path to salvation (Dodwell, Milton & Rassler, 2016: 28–29). It was *destined* to build a heaven on earth, ideal for women and families.

Administrative consolidation

In a 2007 treatise, a jihadi scholar, Uthman bin abd al-Rahman al-Tamimi, noted that "although IS will improve citizens' conditions in both their religious and worldly affairs, improvement of their worldly conditions is less important than the condition of their religion" (Fishman, 2007). This early declaration of IS's responsibilities vis-à-vis its population served mainly a defensive purpose. Al-Tamimi wanted to lower the expectations for the then struggling IS predecessor, and interestingly enough, he used globalization and the eroding sovereignty of modern states to justify his point. In his first public speech in July 2014, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi reiterated, "I do not promise you, as the kings and rulers promise their followers and congregation, of luxury, security, and relaxation; instead, I promise you what Allah promised His faithful worshipers... [to] make them rulers on the land" (SITE Intelligence Group, 2014).

According to the IS's magazine, *Dabiq*, the concerns and traps of *Dunya* (the temporal world) should be disavowed (*bara*), and instead, waging jihad, as an expression of loyalty (*wala*) to God's will, should become the main preoccupation of the IS's "followers."[4] Still, Dabiq admits that "a state cannot be established and maintained without ensuring that a portion of the sincere soldiers of Allah look after both the religious and worldly affairs of the Muslims" (Dabiq no.4, 2014: 28). In its effort to look after the worldly affairs of its "chosen citizenry," the IS effectively high-jacked the state institutions and infrastructure. Taking advantage of the unprecedented inflow of new talent and the rationalization of recruits' profiling process (Dodwell, Milton & Rassler, 2016), the IS had kick-started its state-building project. In a demonstration of operational economy, the IS replicated – with the necessary adjustments – its military bureaucratic system to administer civilian affairs. The result was a hierarchical administration system that consisted of diwans, committees and central joints that extended from the level of central authority down to provinces (*wilayats*) and the local level (al-Tamimi, 2015a: 117–129; Lavoix, 2015; Caris, & Reynolds, 2014: 14–23). General guidelines were set centrally, but they were executed according to local conditions and needs. Around this core structure, a large number of directorates and sub-directorates regulated a wide array of issues. Naturally, the more entrenched IS was in particular areas, the broader and more inclusive the administrative structure was.

Although the IS negates the – secular – need for a constitution and codified laws because the Quran provides all that is necessary, it has issued an unthinkable amount of orders and regulations dealing with the slightest aspect of daily life, indirectly acknowledging that in Quran "rules do not exist for every conceivable matter" (March & Revkin, 2015). For example, the IS has issued rules and defined punishments for behaviours and activities ranging from espionage, adultery, apostasy and witchcraft to embezzlement, burglaries, parking violations and using Apple products (March & Revkin, 2015). The IS has also demonstrated its environmental and urban planning concerns, as it has forbidden the use of electrical current, poison or dynamite to kill fish and it has issued directives on how much of the pavement shop-keepers can occupy to

display their merchandise. Moreover, other regulations dealt with issues such as property rights, selling counterfeit products and excavation of antiquities or set fix prices for rents and childbirth operations.[5]

Most important, the IS forged a social contract with its subjects, similar to the one modern states forge with their citizens – a social contract which, like other (Arab) social contracts that preceded, "provides security, subsidized basic staples, and social services in exchange for political quiescence" (Barfi, 2016). The population was expected to respect the law and pay taxes in exchange for personal and social security, public services and some rights, such as filing complaints against IS officials (March & Revkin, 2015). Corporal punishments for thieves and publicized police raids against drugs, cigarettes and alcohol smugglers paint a picture of heavy-handed, yet total, security. Offenders were subject to extreme, yet rational, justice, with predefined legal steps and set penalties, although actual law enforcement varied across regions.[6] Next to personal security, food adequacy was one of the biggest IS priorities. Acknowledging the importance of food and, particularly, bread in controlling and placating the population, the IS rushed to seize mills and bakeries early in its effort to conquer a city or a region (Al-Tamimi, 2015a; Reuter, 2015; Caris & Reynolds, 2014: 22). The extensive expropriations (from fleeing "apostates") and redistribution of farmlands (March & Revkin, 2015) that followed show that the IS recognized the propaganda value of food security. Likewise, the IS has repeatedly stressed the centrality of *Zakat* and publicized its efforts to feed the needy through free public *iftar* meals during Ramadan and open food kitchens (Dabiq no.2, 2014: 35; Alkhouri & Kassirer, 2015).

Public services and critical infrastructure improvements are next in line. The IS claimed to repair and install new electricity power lines, clean the streets, fix potholes, run buses and operate post offices (Al-Tamimi, 2015a; Zelin, 2014). Moreover, it operated hospitals, a synthetic body parts factory and pharmaceutical factories in Syria and Iraq. The IS publications and video releases featured Western-educated and local doctors in fully equipped operation theatres (Dabiq no.9: 24–6; Islamic State, 2015). Modern science seems to bode well with education, as well. The curricula of schools and universities and textbooks were rewritten to agree with the new ideals, but Social Sciences and to some extent Humanities seem to be the only victims of the "educational reform" (Al-Tamimi, 2015b: spec. 5A). Interestingly, contrary to other radical Islamist state projects (the Taliban), primary education was mandatory for all children, girls or boys, albeit in sex-segregated schools. In a similar vein, vaccinations were encouraged (Alkhouri & Kassirer, 2015), and even more interestingly, HIV-testing was provided (Bedolla & Bedolla, 2016), thus setting aside religious connotations of innovation (*bid'a*) and "divine punishment." Last but not least, completing the list of services that the secular governments failed to provide, IS regularly posted employment opportunities, even providing free religious re-education, if necessary (Al-Tamimi, 2015b: spec. J, K, L).

Such a deep involvement into a population's worldly affairs generates a type of duality where religious law and governance mix and cross-pollinate. Duality takes the form of a *de facto* division between "administration" and "Muslim services" (Caris & Reynolds, 2014: 14). Administration, on one hand, includes institutions and policy fields that relate directly to the IS's politico-religious project, such as Islamic outreach, Sharia institutes, education, law enforcement,

courts, recruitment and tribal relations. Services, on the other, include all these mundane issues and projects that aim at improving the worldly lives of the subjects and winning their hearts and minds. This duality was replicated in the IS's law enforcement and judiciary system as separate police forces and courts dealt with different crimes and violations (SNHR, 2016: 3–4; March & Revkin, 2015). In fact, one may discern also a duality in the penalties and detention conditions in the dozens of known and secret IS-run prisons. According to SNHR (2016), the IS tended to mistreat (i.e. torture) "offenders," who utterly reject the IS utopia project, either through their crimes or general stance. Minor offences were treated with more leniency. Penalties, in this case, were repentance-driven, favouring a correctional, instead of punitive, approach to transgression. Before their release, *minor offenders* were required to take religious lessons from designated sheikhs as a prerequisite to reentering society and savouring its God-given gifts and conveniences.

Territorial expansion

The basic tenet of the IS's conceptualization of territoriality rests on the conviction that the "rebirth of the ummah and the caliphate... require deterritorializing and dismantling the colonial geopolitical heritage and its national borders and nation states and reterritorializing the ummah and caliphate" (Jabareen, 2015: 53). Indeed, the IS has, on several occasions, rejected nationalism or any type of factionalism that stands in the way of a united *ummah* (Dabiq no. 8, 2015: 3–6). As al-Baghdadi stated in 2012, "the Islamic State does not recognize synthetic borders, nor any citizenship besides Islam" (Bunzel, 2015: 24). This statement has two implications. The first implication is that IS is inherently global and that it believes that no aspects of territorial sovereignty, such as "borders... passports or visas [will] prevent [it from expanding]" (Dabiq no.5, 2014: 23) and raising IS's flag in "Makkah and al-Madīnah... Baytul-Maqdis and Rome" (Dabiq no.5, 2014: 3). In this light, all states but the IS are considered illegitimate. Therefore, it does not see itself as part of and does not have any "commitments towards the international community."[7] Second, it denotes IS's transnational inclusiveness. In his July 2014 speech, Baghdadi made this clear by describing the IS as a place where "the Arab and non-Arab, the white man and black man... Chinese, Shami, Iraqi, Yemeni... French, German... [are] brothers" (Dabiq no.1, 2014: 7). Likewise, contrary to modern states, racial hatred seems to have no place in it (Dabiq no.11, 2015: 19) since the only citizenship criterion is being a Muslim. Hence, as Cori Dauber pointedly notes, "Western claims regarding multiculturalism are turned on their head: it is the Islamic State that is truly multicultural, truly color blind, where true equality is possible" (2015).

The imagery of bulldozed borders and foreign fighters burning their passports built the image of global citizenry that did not even require (although highly encouraged) physical presence inside the IS's "temporary" borders. The pledge of allegiance (*ba'ya*) automatically granted (semi-)citizenship. In fact, citizenship was "obligatory," given that "whoever dies without a pledge of allegiance [to the new caliph], dies a death of jahiliyyah." According to the IS, there is no need to "dispatch an army and soldiers" to claim the obedience of its subjects around the world; the presence of the IS delegates or even merely the news of the restoration of the caliphate is deemed sufficient to sustain this claim (Dabiq no.10, 2015: 23). The news about the restoration of the Caliphate, in the *era of information*, reached instantly every corner of the globe, thus rendering the IS claim to Muslim global mobile citizenship "effective immediately."

In practice, the IS's mobile territoriality takes a much more complex form, where territorial and non-territorial sovereignty coexist. Schematically, the IS perceives the world in terms of three geographical rings. The first one represents the core and covers the areas of Mesopotamia. The second is the Muslim-majority countries in the wider area of the Middle East and North Africa (MENA). The third, the external one, covers the rest of the world: Europe, America and Asia (Gambhir, 2015: 9–12). In each ring, the IS operates under different territorial conceptualization and strategy.

In the IS's narrative, the artificial borders cutting through the heartland of *Dar al-Islam* are products of the "Crusader" master plan to control the region. The Arab revolt, Arab flags, Arab nationalism and rulers are all part of the plan to keep the Sunnis weak and divided and this is nowhere more evident than in Syria and Iraq (Dabiq no. 9, 2015: 20–23). By expanding into Syria and merging the two fronts, IS signalled the rupture of Sykes–Picot territorial configuration. The territorial expansion into Syria was dressed with intense eschatological discourse. Al-Sham was presented as having a central role in the divine plan, particularly Damascus and Dabiq (in northern Syria), the former being the stronghold of Islamic forces during the Armageddon and the latter witnessing the final battle against the forces of the non-believers (Dabiq no.3, 2014: 9–10; Dabiq no.4, 2014: 32–37; Dabiq no.9, 2015: 36). However, until its last period of vigour, the IS had not put any serious effort to conquer Damascus. Likewise, although Dabiq was brought under the IS's control in the summer of 2014,[8] IS did not proceed with pushing further north towards Turkey. Such a move would have forced the hand of "Operation Inherent Resolve" or NATO and would have fulfilled the prophecy that a "horde of 80 banners" will line up against the forces of Islam in Dabiq. Instead, it opted for a more rational strategy. Reaching Dabiq and having secured its access to the Turkish border, it turned east in an effort to strengthen the perimeter around its de facto capital, Raqqa. The unsuccessful seize of Kobani was part of this plan. This territorial advance had an additional purpose that also aimed at territorial consolidation, securing its rear and filling in the gaps in Hassakah and Deir ez-Zor, which border the Iraqi provinces of Anbar and Nineveh. At the other side of the border, after the fall of Mosul, the IS forces converged by moving to the west and southwest. This way it created a contiguous zone, controlling most of the Sunni triangle, that linked its main strongholds in Nineveh (Mosul) and Raqqa.

In consonance with the idea of mobile sovereignty, the IS shares no bond with any particular territory, and despite its claims to the contrary,[9] it does not put any specific effort to defend its territorial gains if outnumbered. On the contrary, the decision to establish itself in one area, in the early stages of the insurgency, or to expand to a new one follows the path of least resistance or, as one scholar put it, "avoiding surfaces and exploiting gaps" (Anderson, 2014). Likewise, the IS has shown no intention to be pinned down, defending territory, when the possibility of defeat or the price in fighters and resources is high unless the territory in question is of major symbolical importance (e.g. Mosul). Before they abandon an area, however, they implement a scorched-earth strategy by destroying the infrastructure with which normal life could resume. (Mello & Knights, 2015) Another aspect of the IS's territorial strategy is securing access to borders, and it is exactly this loss of borderlands that precipitated the IS's territorial shrinkage and eventual demise in Syria and Iraq. Border control serves a dual purpose. On one hand, it provides control over cross-border trade and smuggling routes, which can yield significant economic benefits (via formal and informal taxation) and might help placate the tribes that are involved in smuggling. Additionally, it provides an entry point for much needed foreign fighters. On the other hand, forward access to borderlands can act as a staging ground for expansion into neighbouring countries.

If, by changing its name to ISIS, the IS announced its expansion into Syria, its decision to erase any territorial reference advertised the initiation of expansion beyond its Mesopotamian core. Expansion into the second geographical ring rested less on military conquest, because of the IS's

limited capacity of physical power projection, and more on the declaration of ba'ya from established militant forces. Nevertheless, *ba'ya* is not sufficient to herald expansion in the form of new *wilayats*. The IS set specific preconditions: unification of the jihadi forces operating in the area, nomination of a leader, a detailed plan of military conquest and submission of the "file" to IS central authorities for evaluation and approval (Dabiq no.7, 2015: 35). On these grounds, *bay'a*s from Sinai, Libya, Yemen, Algeria, the Arabian Peninsula (Saudi Arabia) and Nigeria resulted in the creation of *wilayats* while the *wilayats* in Caucasus and Khorasan (Af-Pak) were delayed, and other *ba'ya*s were accepted but not considered for official expansion (Dabiq no.5, 2014: 24). These preconditions, as well as the transition from emirates to *wilayats* and from emirs to *walis*, signal the importance the IS places on territorial consolidation, the capacity of the local forces to achieve it and expansion along the path of least resistance. This applies to all new *wilayats*, with the exception of Saudi Arabia, Algeria and, to some extent, Afghanistan and Pakistan. Expansion into Saudi Arabia was mainly guided by religious and ideological reasons while, in the other two cases, antagonism with al-Qaeda must have played an important role. Likewise, failure to fulfil these preconditions and the lack of politico-religious significance has led the IS to withhold official recognition as wilayats elsewhere. The Philippines, where a significant portion of the Abu Sayyaf group under the leadership of Isnilon Hapilon swore allegiance as early as July 2014 is a case in point. There, the limited and often unstable territorial control of affiliated forces, as the Marawi siege later indicated, the fragmentation of Islamist forces – locally and in the wider South-East Asia region – and the unyielding determination of the Duterte government to crush the insurgency had prompted the IS to accept the *bay'a* but not to proclaim the creation of a new *wilayat* (Jayakumar, 2017).

The official rationale for expanding into specific areas is a mix of religious and strategic reasoning. For example, Sinai is presented as a natural part of al-Sham and "a front against the Jews" while it also is the place of mountain at-Tur where God spoke to Moses (Dabiq no.5, 2014: 28–9). The IS also highlights the proximity of these areas that allow the groups to help each other and eventually close the ranks between them and the IS in Syria and Iraq (Dabiq no.5, 2014: 28, 32).[10] Moreover, in terms of further expansion, Libya and Algeria carry the historical weight of being the staging grounds for expanding into Spain, as the first step towards the conquer of the third and last geographical ring, Europe and the Western world (Dabiq no.5, 2014: 30).

Expansion into the external ring started before the consolidation of the IS forces in the second ring, demonstrating that the IS could operate and expand in a nonlinear fashion. Indeed, Dabiq moved from an imagery of a functioning state to one of an unpredictable force capable to wreak havoc wherever it chooses. In its call to the global Islamic citizenry, it states that inability to perform *hijra* is no excuse for not "performing jihād against the enemies of Islam near him" (Dabiq no.11, 2015: 54).

The true rationale behind the surge of attacks in the West can have several possible, and highly contradicting, explanations. For example, the IS could have fallen victim of its "myth of unstoppable progress" (Barrett, 2015: 1), which, after the loss of territory in Syria/Iraq, left it with no option but to expand the ring of attacks or perish. However, IS might, in a clear act of belligerence, intended to hasten the final battle by inducing its enemies to scale their intervention,

betting on its victory under the current global configuration and local circumstances. Not less likely, however, and away from rational cost/benefit analysis, the IS might have been engulfed in its apocalyptic visions of an imminent end (Rapoport, 2016).

In this sense, this transcendent appeal of IS message does not only require a complete re-configuration of the international system beyond the Westphalian order, but it also challenges the very conceptualization of political authority and sovereignty. Nonetheless, the IS appeared to contemplate a role as a member of the current secular international system (Dabiq no. 12, 2015: 48–50). The IS indirectly adopts the term "revolutionary state-building organisation," coined by Stephen Walt (2015), in order to describe its nature. Furthermore, in the same article, the author is connecting the IS to the examples of previous, revolutionary state-building organizations, such as the Bolshevik and the Maoist revolutionaries. Both organizations challenged the configuration and conceptualization of the world order but eventually they were granted recognition by the international system. This international recognition and inclusion into the international system would not have meant acceptance by the IS of the evil character of this man-made system. On the contrary, it sought to reconcile an Islamic worldview with a secular international reality of multiple territorial states through the option of truce in Sharia law.

Conclusion

In order to facilitate its faith-based territoriality, the IS developed a strategy of expansion along three geographical rings: the first is the Iraq–Syria ring; the second is the near abroad, namely the wider Middle East; and the third is the rest of the world, including the *Dar al-Harb*, the non-Muslim countries.

In the first ring, territoriality takes the form of contiguous territory. In this, the IS pursued a policy of selective population homogenization through outward and inward migration, following the model of secular nation-state's project. In the second, expansion resembled forward positions which eventually would converge and unite. Expansion of sovereignty is based on a dual principle: allegiance (*ba'ya*) from organizations and groups (not individuals) and the fulfilment of specific conditions that demonstrate these groups' capacity to consolidate and expand, on one hand, and their submission to the scrutiny and the rule of the core, the Sharia council in Syria–Iraq, on the other. In the third ring, territoriality and sovereignty take the form of individual *bay'a* that qualifies somebody to become "citizen" of the IS in the *Dar al-Harb*, with all the rights and war responsibilities of such qualification.

As regional territorial states, particularly Iraq and Syria, collapse, this failure of the nation-state project challenges the borders, which were drawn by the colonial powers after the Great War. Rendering these boundaries irrelevant, the IS's expansion has not only seriously challenged the territorial basis of the nation-state initiated by colonialism, but it also claims that it thwarts all the machinations of the Crusaders, be it the US, the European colonial powers or their allies. For the IS, the international order reflects a domination of the idolatry and the subordination of the Muslim communities to infidel powers. It also rejects international laws and norms since they are barren of divine justice and morality. At the same time, however, the IS contemplates its membership in the current secular international system.

A substantial part of the Sunni Arabs in Syria and particularly in Iraq thought of the IS as a corrective power which would remedy the demise and the socio- political marginalization of the Sunni element vis-à-vis the Shia/Alawite domination and fight "injustice, humiliation and dishonor" brought by external intervention, neo-liberal attacks on social justice, and secular state corruption. Because of Iraq's violent de-Ba'athification, a number of Sunni Iraqis lost their sources of income, were disgraced and vulnerable to economic hardship, lost their power and were ruled by their former subordinates (Shia). Sunni alienation from the nation-state project enabled the IS to translate its faith-based ideology through secular terms. For the IS, the regimes were illegitimate, not only because, as apostates, they were against Allah but also because, due to their secular, anti-Islamic character, they cannot provide their people with dignity and rights they promised them. In other words, the IS rests the validity of its metaphysical worldview on the failure of the secular project to uphold a "social contract" between the rulers and governed. Hence, provision of services, security and justice were seen as types of active (or constructive)

resistance to corrupt leaders. The IS attempted to reconstruct the "social contract," led now authentically by faith.

The IS employed a number of functions, strategies and agencies that have been advanced in the secular/rational Westphalian state, as these were adopted by the Syrian and Iraqi modern states. In a way, the IS strove to establish a hybrid state, where rational cognition is translated through religious vocabulary, in order to be combined with the central role of religion in the public space. It does not repudiate reason in the form of either technology or the results of institutionalized sciences. An extensive bureaucratic mechanism (military and administrative) under the supervision of a central authority (sharia council), extreme violence (a common feature in the Iraqi and Syrian secular nation-state projects) and the use of modern military strategies and tactics were secular/rational conduits for transplanting religious forms of life and society. The provision of services, security and justice and the upholding of a "social contract" were common languages that make these forms intelligible to the society.

We can, hence, argue that the IS's post-secularity comes from a non-Western vantage point. The religious is not translated through the secular, and it does not serve the latter's interests. It appropriates and transforms the secular structures and idioms in order for the religious to become translatable to various sections of the society. It does not use secular ideas and agents as mere instruments, as the appropriated secular structures become built-in elements of the IS's hybrid state, far, however, from a norm of irenic symbiosis between the religious and the secular.

Notes

1 In contrast, the Shia deem themselves the rising power. The Shia parties control the central government in Iraq, the Resistance Bloc is the dominant power in Lebanon and the sanctions against Iran have been lifted.

2 References to apocalypse abound in Islamic State's publications. Its now-discontinued magazine, *Dabiq*, takes its name from a hadith that claims that the final battle between the forces of Islam and the Crusaders will take place in Dabiq (northern Syria).

3 Counter-insurgency strategy with three distinct, yet interrelated phases. The first consists of "clearing" an area of insurgent forces. The second phase consists of operations, usually with the extensive use of local forces, to preserve peace and stability in the area and prevent insurgents from returning. The final phase refers to efforts aiming at infrastructure improvement and the establishment of political institutions that can secure the support of the civilian local population and long-term stability.

4 The concept of "Al-Wala Wal-Bara" is central in the Salafi discourse, roughly meaning loyalty to everything Allah loves and disavowal/dissociation from anything he disapproves. It is interpreted differently – more narrowly or more broadly – in different Salafi strands. In the IS discourse the "Al-Wala Wal-Bara" concept becomes all-encompassing.

5 For a comprehensive, regularly updated list of IS regulations see (al-Tamimi, 2015b)

6 This discrepancy can be merely evidence of IS administrative deficiency. Another interesting explanation asserts that instances of excessive zeal and harsher penalties can result from prior local tensions and animosity that encourage local IS members to act out of revenge (Al Aqeedi, 2016: 7).

7 Cited in (al-Shishani, 2014: 6). Interestingly, one of the main arguments the IS used against al-Qaeda, and the latter's renewal of *ba'ya* to Mullah Omar was the Taliban's effort to present themselves as responsible members of the international system, who are bound by its rules (Dabiq no.6, 2014: 24).

8 The IS has since lost control of Dabiq (October 2016). In anticipation of the loss of Dabiq, the IS decided to discontinue the publication of *Dabiq* magazine and replace it with *Rumiyah*.

9 Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi has stated that "[the Islamic State] will not retreat from any spot of land to which it has expanded, and it will not diminish after enlarging." Cited in (Bunzel, 2015: 26).

10 It is noteworthy that each interview with leaders of pro-IS groups across the region start with questions about their – geographic – "role" in the regional and global Caliphate project. See for example the interview with the amir of a Bengali pro-IS group, who manages to place Bangladesh within the caliphate project, although the historic caliphate never reached the area (Dabiq no.14, 2016: 63–64)

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