

DEBATE - REFLECTIONS

Civil Resistance vs. ISIS

Maria J. Stephan¹

Maria J. Stephan is a senior policy fellow at the United States Institute of Peace (USIP) and a nonresident senior fellow at the Atlantic Council

Introduction

The Islamic State of Iraq and Al-Sham (ISIS), a radical religious organization that exhibits attributes of both an insurgency and a totalitarian regime, is the latest global scourge. Even top U.S. generals acknowledge that military force alone is insufficient to degrade, much less defeat an organization that currently rules an area larger than the United Kingdom (Fallows, 2015).² ISIS, which aims to create an independent Islamic state, or caliphate, will only be weakened through a multifaceted strategy combining diplomatic, economic, political and other means. Organized civilian action that aims to disrupt and deny the group's key sources of power could be a critical part of that strategy. This article will examine this contention and suggest how, practically, such nonviolent resistance could be supported.

Some commentators have called nonviolent resistance to ISIS a nonsensical response (Peck, 2014).³ Their skepticism is understandable. After all, this is a transnational jihadi group with an apocalyptic worldview, awash in cash and sophisticated weapons that has institutionalized

¹ The author would like to thank Chelsey Dreher and Danny Hajjar for their research assistance.

² Fallows, James. February 15, 2015. "On the Impossibility of Fighting ISIS." *The Atlantic*. <http://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2015/02/on-the-impossibility-of-fighting-isis/385530/>.

³ Peck, Michael. July 9, 2014. "Sorry, Peaceniks – Nonviolence Won't Stop ISIS." *Medium*. <https://medium.com/war-is-boring/sorry-peaceniks-nonviolence-wont-stop-isis-de96bc546019>.

the practice of rape and regularly employs beheadings and crucifixions to terrorize populations under their control (Callimachi, 2015).⁴ Meanwhile ISIS is functioning as a quasi-state: the group delivers services and builds infrastructure, its shari'a courts dole out consistent verdicts, and it boasts a well-oiled media propaganda effort (Wood, 2015).⁵

There is no quick fix to the ISIS scourge, or to the political and governance failures that fueled its rise. Meanwhile, while global attention has honed in on the terrorist group, vastly more civilian lives have been lost due to barrel bombs and intentional targeting of civilians by the Bashar al-Assad regime in Syria (Roth, 2015).⁶ State and non-state tyranny have reinforced each other in the cases of ISIS. Civil resistance, a strategy of political struggle that relies on techniques of self-organization and collective noncooperation, can contribute to an aggressive containment of ISIS and help dissolve its roots (Neumann, 2015) by weakening its legitimacy and support base.⁷

ISIS's Objectives

Before considering the role of civil resistance, or any other response, in challenging ISIS, one should assess the motivations and capabilities of this group. ISIS's central political goal is to re-establish an Islamic caliphate, which has not been seen since the dissolution of the Ottoman

⁴ Callimachi, Rukmini. August 13, 2015. "ISIS Enshrines a Theology of Rape." *The New York Times*. http://www.nytimes.com/2015/08/14/world/middleeast/isis-enshrines-a-theology-of-rape.html?emc=edit_na_20150813&nliid=64560341&ref=cta&r=1.

⁵ Wood, Graeme. March 2015. "What ISIS Really Wants." *The Atlantic*. <http://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2015/03/what-isis-really-wants/384980/>.

⁶ Roth, Kenneth. August 5, 2015. "Barrel Bombs, Not ISIS, Are the Greatest Threat to Syrians." Human Rights Watch. <https://www.hrw.org/news/2015/08/05/barrel-bombs-not-isis-are-greatest-threat-syrians>.

⁷ Neumann, Peter R. August 16, 2015. "Smart and Realistic: Defeating ISIS through a Strategy of "Aggressive Containment." Informal Institute for National Security Thinkers and Practitioners. <http://maxoki161.blogspot.com/2015/08/smart-and-realistic-defeating-isis.html>.

Empire (Lewis, 2014).⁸ Its strategy to achieve this political vision is, first, military conquest to claim control over territory, starting with Iraq and Syria; and second, to establish functional governance in that territory as a means to legitimize its religious authority (Ibid.).⁹

Unlike other prominent jihadi groups, including al-Qaeda, ISIS requires territory for legitimacy and to exert political and religious control. Where it holds power, ISIS collects taxes, regulates prices, operates courts, and provides services ranging from health care and education to telecommunications (Wood, 2015).¹⁰ In this way, and based on the selective ways it has employed violence, ISIS resembles traditional insurgencies (Pischedda, 2015).¹¹ This also represents a vulnerability, since ISIS is currently spread thinly across northern Iraq and eastern Syria.

ISIS is ideologically committed to the destruction of the modern nation-state and to returning civilization to a seventh-century legal environment. Every decision and law promulgated by the so-called Islamic State, including stoning for adultery, amputation, slavery of infidels and crucifixions, are based on its interpretation of the prophecy and example of Muhammad, also known as the “Prophetic methodology” (Wood, 2015).¹² Central to ISIS’s worldview is the idea that its actions today are laying the groundwork for the “Day of Judgment,” or apocalypse, when the end of the world is presaged by massive battles between Muslim and Western armies. ISIS’s English language propaganda magazine, *Dabiq*, is named after the place in Syria where those battles are supposed to occur according to the hadith, or sayings of the Prophet Mohammed.

⁸ Lewis, Jessica D. July 2014. “The Islamic State: A Counter Strategy for a Counter-State.” Institute for the Study of War. <http://www.understandingwar.org/sites/default/files/Lewis-Center%20of%20gravity.pdf>.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Wood, “What ISIS Really Wants.”

¹¹ Pischedda, Costantino. August 27, 2015. “A Provocative Article Says the Islamic State is a Mystery. Here’s Why That’s Wrong.” *The Washington Post*. <http://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/monkey-cage/wp/2015/08/27/the-islamic-state-is-no-mystery/>.

¹² Wood, “What ISIS Really Wants.”

In order to dismantle political boundaries in Iraq, Syria and the broader region, ISIS is seeking to expedite government failure and stoke sectarian civil war. Years of civil war and weak nationalist projects in Syria and Iraq have helped ISIS considerably (Hashim, 2014: P. 76).¹³ The organization will aim to win and maintain territory in Iraq and Syria, govern the populations within, and defend it against external threats. Finally, it will recruit Muslims to fight alongside and live within the caliphate, eventually connecting it to the wider Muslim community, or Umma.

ISIS's Sources of Power

A central insight from the civil resistance literature is that no government or other power-holder, including non-state or quasi-state actors like ISIS, is monolithic. Rather, their power is fluid and dependent on the active and passive cooperation of ordinary people. As Gene Sharp has written,

The rulers of governments and political systems are not omnipotent, nor do they possess self-generating power. All dominating elites and rulers depend for their sources of power upon the cooperation of the population and of the institutions of the society they would rule (Sharp, 1990: 3).¹⁴

The theoretical and practical challenge for civil resistance scholars is how collective nonviolent action, both within and outside ISIS territory, can be used to disrupt the patterns of cooperation and obedience on which ISIS depends and deny it the human and material resources it needs to wield effective control (Bartkowski, 2014).¹⁵ How can sporadic,

¹³ Hashim, Ahmed S. December 2014. "The Islamic State: From al-Qaeda Affiliate to Caliphate," *Middle East Policy* 21.4, P. 76.

¹⁴ Sharp, Gene. 1990. "The Role of Power in Nonviolent Struggle." The Albert Einstein Institution. P. 3. <http://www.aeinstein.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/09/TheRoleofPowerinNonviolentStruggle-English.pdf>.

¹⁵ Bartkowski, Maciej. December 20, 2014. "Can Political Struggle Against ISIL Succeed Where Violence Cannot." *War on the Rocks*. <http://warontherocks.com/2014/12/can-political-struggle-against-isil-succeed-where-violence-cannot/>.

localized nonviolent action in ISIS-controlled parts of Syria and Iraq be supported and scaled?¹⁶

Sharp's consent theory of power has been critiqued for downplaying structural realities that shape individuals' behaviors and focusing instead on the psychological processes that drive individual level obedience. Critics contend that obedience is not as voluntary as the consent theory of power would suggest - that it is instead the only option for citizens whose behaviors and agency are constrained by the power asymmetries inherent in social systems like patriarchy, capitalism and bureaucratic hierarchies (Martin, 1989).¹⁷

Indeed, one could assert that accounts of civilian behavior under ISIS are similarly downplaying structural factors. Arguments in this vein would suggest that those obeying ISIS' dictates in Iraq and Syria are hardly doing so voluntarily: they are being terrorized into submission. While true in many respects, terror-based fear does not explain ISIS' ability to recruit foreign fighters or keep a state functional. And it doesn't mean that the group is not vulnerable to organized political struggle. The next section will apply Sharp's six sources of power to ISIS and suggest ways they could they be severed through civil resistance (Sharp, 2013: 5-6).¹⁸

Authority, or perceived legitimacy

Authority, or perceived legitimacy, is the quality that leads people to voluntarily obey commands, accept decisions, accede to requests, or follow suggestions. It is the perceived right to command or direct the actions of others.

¹⁶ For a discussion on scaling up support for localized, nonviolent action, see: Stephan, Maria J. April 2015. "Resisting ISIS." *Sojourners*. <https://sojo.net/magazine/april-2015/resisting-isis>.

¹⁷ Martin, Brian. 1989. "Gene Sharp's Theory of Power." *Journal of Peace Research*, 26.2. <http://www.bmartin.cc/pubs/89jpr.html>.

¹⁸ Sharp, Gene. 2013. "How Nonviolent Struggle Works." The Albert Einstein Institution. <http://www.aeinstein.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/01/How-Nonviolent-Struggle-Works.pdf>. P. 5-6.

ISIS' ideology is coherent and its vision of an alternative religio-political reality is compelling to many Arabs and Muslims disillusioned with the status quo. This particular theology, which acknowledges ISIS leader Abu Bakir al Baghdadi as the eighth caliph and commander of all Muslims, and orders all Muslims to both accept his dictates and to struggle for the caliph, is defended by a cadre of Islamic scholars and sophisticated information and propaganda effort (Dettmer, 2014).¹⁹

Simply declaring ISIS “un-Islamic” is unlikely to make much headway, given the amount of resources the organization is dedicating to propagating its vision of Islamic jurisprudence. Instead Islamic scholars, both Sunni and Shia, who are well versed in Koranic text could offer pointed renunciations of ISIS' religious interpretations. In addition, ISIS recruits and their families, who have grown disillusioned living under ISIS's rule, could act as powerful counter-voices to the righteous narrative put forward by ISIS.

The number of disenchanted ISIS defectors is growing as their battlefield experiences are not living up to expectations.²⁰ Amplifying these voices and their stories – through supporting and coordinating a united hashtag campaign on Twitter, for example – could prove a more fruitful course of action for Western governments that have attempted to create and propagate their own counter-narratives. Digital resistance that enables and empowers credible Arab and Muslim voices should be part of any counter-ISIS strategy.

Humor as Critical Counter-ISIS Weapon

Humor and satire, which have served an important role in Arab culture going all the way back to its ancient poetry, are among the most powerful ways to undermine ISIS's legitimacy. A growing body of literature

¹⁹ Dettmer, Jamie. July 9, 2014. “Al Qaeda to ISIS: Get Off My Lawn – The Theological Debate Behind the Caliphate.” *The Daily Beast*. <http://www.thedailybeast.com/articles/2014/07/09/al-qaeda-to-isis-get-off-my-lawn-the-theological-debate-behind-the-caliphate.html>.

²⁰ De Fraytas-Tamura, Kimiko. September 20, 2015. “ISIS Defectors Reveal Disillusionment,” *New York Times*. http://www.nytimes.com/2015/09/21/world/europe/isis-defectors-reveal-disillusionment.html?_r=0.

highlights the potential utility of humor when it is integrated into strategic, nonviolent struggles. Drawing on theories of both nonviolent action and humor, researchers and practitioners have shown that humor has been successfully employed in nonviolent resistance campaigns in Serbia, Norway and a number of other locales.

Humor allows resisters to manipulate uncertainties and cognitive incongruities, enabling them to undermine an oppressor in a manner that is less confrontational than other tactics like protests or street demonstrations. In other words, humor allows movement participants to communicate serious messages under a façade of innocence that makes their actions less openly threatening to the opposition (Sørensen, 2008: 171).²¹ Humor can also play a role in creating dilemma actions for opposition members, in building movement solidarity, and in reliving intramovement stress (Sørensen, 2008; Sørensen and Martin, 2014; Hastings, 2014).²² In areas under extremely oppressive ISIS control, humor is one of the main tools that activists have at their disposal. As revolting as ISIS practices are, satire developed by popular Arab and Muslim artists and media personalities targeting the hypocrisy and absurdity of ISIS tyranny can help lower fear barriers while poking holes in ISIS's claims to authority.

In Raqqa, the first city liberated from regime control in northeastern Syria, which was later taken over by ISIS and now serves as the group's de facto capital, humor has become a staple of anti-ISIS resistance. The Raqqa is Being Silently Slaughtered campaign, launched in June 2014, was one of the first activities to use verified reporting of ISIS activities, combined with humor, to deride the group's ideology and brutality (Van Langendonck, 2015).²³ The campaign, which is based in Turkey but relies

²¹ Sørensen, Majken Jul. "Humor as a Serious Strategy of Nonviolent Resistance to Oppression." *Peace & Change*, 33.2: 167-190.

²² Sørensen, "Humor as a Serious Strategy;" Sørensen, Majken Jul and Brian Martin. 2014. "The Dilemma Action: Analysis of an Activist Technique." *Peace & Change*, 39.1: 73-100; Hastings, Tom H. 2014. *A New Era of Nonviolence: The Power of Civil Society Over War*. McFarland. Jefferson, North Carolina: McFarland.

²³ Van Langendonck, Gert. July 8, 2015. "For Syrian Activist Group, Resisting the Islamic State isn't about Making War." *McClatchy DC*. <http://www.mcclatchydc.com/news/nation-world/world/middle-east/article26745517.html>

on a group of activist-informants inside Raqqa, now has over 25,000 Facebook and 10,000 Twitter followers. As one of the campaign leaders, 29-year old Mohammad Khedhr, pointed out, “Humor can be a powerful weapon. Daash [ISIS] rules through fear. If we can make people laugh at them we break through the fear barrier” (Ibid.).²⁴

Meanwhile, the northern Idlib (Syria) town of Kafr Nabl has won international acclaim for its vibrant self-organization and use of humor targeting ISIS, the regime, regional actors and the international community (Abdelaziz, 2013).²⁵ Every Friday, village members rally around a new banner, written in Arabic and English, critiquing some aspect of the revolution, including ISIS tyranny, while showcasing community solidarity and resilience. ISIS has failed to establish a foothold in Kafr Nabl.

In response to ISIS’s campaign of terror, television networks throughout the Middle East, including Iraq, have broadcast animation and comedy to ridicule the group’s radical views. “Loony Tunes” style cartoons have derided the group’s primitive ideology and animated contradictions in their radical philosophy (Hall, 2014).²⁶ Social media, in facilitating the quick dissemination of information across geographical barriers, has also played a role in nonviolent resistance to heavy handed rule in ISIS-held territories. A new Twitter account mocking the organization, called “ISIS Karaoke”, has gone viral (Kesvani, 2015).²⁷ The account takes photos from ISIS propaganda videos, and then captions them with lyrics of famous pop artists, including Beyoncé and Britney Spears.

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Abdelaziz, Salma. October 24, 2013. “In Northern Syria, Rebels Use Satire as a Weapon.” *CNN*. <http://www.cnn.com/2013/10/22/world/syria-war-satire/>.

²⁶ Hall, John. September 1, 2014. “ISIS Jihadis Blowing Themselves Up and Rejecting Radio as Un-Islamic – Welcome to Iraqi TV’s Cartoon Satire on Terror.” *Daily Mail*. <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-2739534/ISIS-jihadis-blowing-rejecting-radio-Islamic-welcome-Iraqi-TVs-cartoon-satire-terror.html>.

²⁷ Kesvani, Hussein. August 24, 2015. “This Twitter Account is Hilariously Mocking ISIS with Popular Karaoke Songs.” *BuzzFeed News*. <http://www.buzzfeed.com/husseinkesvani/isis-karaoke-twitter-account#.jsr036qLx>.

Personnel

Personnel are the people who obey, cooperate with, or give assistance to the powerholders. This includes people working within the ruling authority and allied institutions, as well as cooperating persons in the general population.

ISIS didn't take over large swaths of Iraq and Syria without the active and passive support of many people. In Iraq, ISIS exploited widespread anger targeting the government of former Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki and the Shi'a-dominated Iraqi security forces to rally fighters and supporters (Sergie et al., 2015).²⁸ Initially, in some places ISIS fighters, backed by Sunni tribal leaders and others, were greeted as liberators. In Syria, ISIS took advantage of the power vacuum in territory cleared of Assad regime forces, including power rivalries between various opposition groups, to establish control of the territory (Lister, 2014).²⁹

ISIS relies on the skills and resources of imams and Islamic legal scholars, engineers, tax collectors, bankers, teachers, trigger-pullers, farmers, truck and taxi drivers, oil workers, recruiters, service providers,

²⁸ The Council on Foreign Relations produced a comprehensive overview of the history of Shia-Sunni Sectarianism in the Middle East. The overview explains the way in which sectarianism has contributed to violence in the region, and the way in which it has contributed to the rise of ISIS. For further information, see: Sergie, Mohammed Aly et al. August 2015. "The Sunni-Shia Divide." The Council on Foreign Relations. http://www.cfr.org/peace-conflict-and-human-rights/sunni-shia-divide/p33176#!/?cid=otr-marketing_url-sunni_shia_infoguide#resources.

²⁹ In late 2014, the Brookings Institute released a report profiling the Islamic State. A section of the report was dedicated to examining the infrastructure and services that exist in areas under the control of ISIS. The organization has established large and complex educational, health, transportation, and other systems that depend upon the services of the individuals listed above. The participation of not just fighters but of individuals that can fill roles similar to those of civil servants and small business owners are key factors in ISIS's ability to meet the needs of populations in these areas. For a description of ISIS governance, see: Lister, Charles. December 2014. "Profiling the Islamic State." The Brookings Institute. http://www.brookings.edu/~media/Research/Files/Reports/2014/11/profiling-islamic-state-lister/en_web_listier.pdf?la=en.

tribal leaders and wide array of other societal groups to exert control and influence (Ibid.: 25-29).³⁰ Members of these groups are not equally loyal to ISIS. One of ISIS's greatest vulnerabilities is its ability to provide reliable, good-enough governance to those under its control for an extended period of time. Disruptions in service delivery, joblessness, and inflation are as problematic for ISIS as they are for state actors.

There have been documented cases of popular challenges to ISIS policies and practices. In Mosul, Iraq, a city overrun by ISIS in July 2014, there have been a number of isolated acts of civil resistance. In July 2014, after a prominent imam and 33 followers refused to pledge allegiance to ISIS leader al Baghdadi, a large following of the imam's supporters marched to the mosque where he preached to demonstrate solidarity. ISIS detained some of the protestors but didn't kill any of the religious leaders, who had large followings. That same month, when an ISIS battalion charged with demolishing mosques and other heritage sites deemed heretical threatened to explode the Crooked Minaret, residents living nearby formed a human chain to protect it.³¹ They warned the fighters that they would have to kill them first if they wanted to destroy the mosque. The militants backed down and left.

In Syria, nonviolent resistance challenging ISIS began as early as July 2013 in Raqqa, the first city liberated from regime forces. After ISIS began to establish a presence there, a Muslim schoolteacher named Soaad Nofel began marching daily to ISIS headquarters carrying a cardboard sign with messages challenging the behaviors of ISIS members as un-Islamic and demanding the release of nonviolent activists whom it had kidnapped. She was joined by hundreds of other protestors and a small number of activists were released (Taleb, 2015).³² A year later, the

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ The attempted destruction on the Crooked Minaret in Mosul was part of a larger ISIS campaign to destroy significant cultural sights in areas under the organizations control. For a discussion of what motivates this campaign and a list of impacted historical sights, see: Cullinane, Susannah, Hamdi Alkhshali and Mohammed Twfeeq. April 13, 2015. "Tracking a Trail of Historical Destruction. ISIS Trumpets Destruction of Nimrud. *CNN*. <http://www.cnn.com/2015/03/09/world/iraq-isis-heritage/>.

³² Taleb, Julia. August 22, 2014. "From Assad to ISIS: A Tale of Syrian Resis-

Raqqa is Being Slaughtered Silently campaign attracted thousands of on-line followers. ISIS nevertheless maintains a firm grip on the city. Raqqa activists have since acknowledged that their failure to wage an organized challenge to ISIS earlier helped the group anchor its presence there.

While mass protests are highly risky under ISIS, there are other tactics that those living under ISIS control could employ to slow or thwart the smooth functioning of ISIS operations. Deliberate under-performance in ISIS administration, sharing of important documents and information to activists and outside supporters, nonviolent sabotage of oil production facilities and other infrastructure – these are examples of nonviolent action that could weaken ISIS's grip on power. Yet even these more quiet, nuanced actions are fraught with risk.

ISIS's support base extends far beyond Syria and Iraq. Its military wing is reinforced by at least 20,000 foreign fighters from Chechnya, North Africa, Europe, North America, and even Asia ("Jihadi Trails").³³ According to experts, it is not the graphic videos of beheadings that are attracting recruits (Stern, 2015).³⁴ Rather, it is the persistent on and offline relationship building that ISIS recruiters are using to first win people to the cause, and then lure them to the battlefield. For young Muslim men (and women) who are socially, politically, and economically marginalized in their home countries, the prospect of an exciting experience fighting for a presumably noble cause is highly attractive.

In instances where a powerholders' sources of power range beyond the immediate domestic context, scholars have found that effective civil resistance requires extending the nonviolent battlefield.³⁵ One example

tance." Waging Nonviolence. <http://wagingnonviolence.org/feature/assad-isis-tale-resistance/>.

³³ "Jihadi Trails: The Circuitous Routes Foreigners Take to Syria and Iraq." Edited by Crowley, John and Tom Mudd. *Wall Street Journal*. <http://graphics.wsj.com/jihadi-trails/?mod=e2tw>.

³⁴ Stern, Jessica and J.M. Berger. March 8, 2015. "ISIS and the Foreign-Fighter Phenomenon." *The Atlantic*. <http://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2015/03/isis-and-the-foreign-fighter-problem/387166/>.

³⁵ Stephan, Maria. Summer 2006. "Fighting for Statehood: The Role of Civilian-Based Resistance in the East Timorese, Palestinian, and Kosovo Albanian

of this in the ISIS context is disrupting the relationship between ISIS recruiters and potential recruits. Hacktivists from groups like Anonymous are already subverting ISIS's social media communications.³⁶ Counter-recruitment efforts involving organized action by those Muslims who have defected from ISIS and by popular religious and entertainment personalities could help slow the steady supply of manpower to ISIS.

Skills and knowledge.

This section refers to the availability of needed skills, knowledge, and talents among those persons cooperating with power-holders.

Besides the trigger-pullers and trained jihadis, ISIS relies on a network of support that includes religious scholars and imams, engineers and laborers, bankers, drivers, online recruiters, service administrators, tax collectors, bureaucrats, and media/communications practitioners (Lister, 2014: 25-29).³⁷ ISIS will only be able to create and sustain a functioning state if these groups provide the knowledge and know-how required to collect taxes, produce ISIS "passports," assess and implement infrastructure projects, collect traffic tickets, deliver medical care, run the schools, provide licenses, promulgate religious edicts, and produce propaganda for traditional and social media.

Each of these groups present vulnerabilities for ISIS if some of their members either fail to perform as they are expected to, or else begin to actively (though likely quietly) disobey. Organized disruption of ISIS administrative and governance functions could assume a variety of different forms. Go-slow tactics, prolonged "sickness", and the delivery of non-ISIS religious and educational materials to underground schools, while obviously not without risk, could be used to slow or thwart ISIS activities.

Self-Determination Movements." *The Fletcher Forum*. Volume 30, Issue 2.

³⁶ For an overview of the Anonymous campaign against ISIS, see: Viebeck, Elise. February 12, 2015. "Anarchist Hackers Start Cyber War with ISIS." The Hill. <http://thehill.com/policy/cybersecurity/232583-anarchist-hackers-go-to-cyber-war-with-isis>.

³⁷ Lister, "Profiling the Islamic State" 25-29.

Noncooperation by the business community could be potentially consequential, though difficult to organize. In the northern Syrian town of Menbej, in Aleppo province, the business community closed their shops in a general strike against ISIS in May 2014. ISIS cracked down on the shop owners and they remained defiant, albeit for a short time (Taleb, 2015).³⁸ Consumer boycotts targeting businesses and business leaders known to be selling ISIS food stuffs, machine parts, and infrastructure materials could be another effective form of extending the nonviolent battlefield.

Material resources

This is the control of money, land, computers, communications, transportation, natural resources, etc., which power-holders can use for their own purposes.

ISIS controls a sizeable amount of territory and is organized as a highly efficient company, whose operations are fueled through a self-financing business worth an estimated \$2 billion (Gray, 2014).³⁹

The organization captured US-made tanks and advanced weapons systems from Iraqi troops when they overran Mosul last July. While the sale of oil from ISIS-controlled parts of Iraq and Syria was once a major source of revenue for the organization, as oil pipelines and extraction sites have been increasingly targeted by US-led military strikes, the organization has had to raise funds elsewhere. According to the New York Times, ISIS relies on extortion and taxation, taking in more than \$1 million per day, to fund its jihadist activities (Almukhtar, 2015).⁴⁰ The organization taxes salaries of Iraqi government employees along with the contracts and revenue of companies.

³⁸ Taleb, “From Assad to ISIS.”

³⁹ Gray, John. July 11, 2014. “A Point of View: ISIS and What it Means to be Modern.” *BBC*. <http://www.bbc.com/news/magazine-28246732>.

⁴⁰ Almukhtar, Sarah. May 19, 2015. “ISIS Finances are Strong.” *The New York Times*. http://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2015/05/19/world/middleeast/isis-finances.html?_r=0.

ISIS benefits from an extensive communications and service-delivery infrastructure to be able to provide basic governance in the areas it controls (Lister, 2014: 25-29).⁴¹

Preventative action targeting communities in territories abutting or close to ISIS-controlled parts of Iraq and Syria is another way to both deter ISIS activities and deny the organization a steady supply of material resources. Studies of nonviolent action targeting non-state armed groups reveal that those communities in places like the Philippines, Columbia, and Syria boasting the highest degree of self-organization were the most capable of “nudging” these armed groups while remaining resilient to violence. Civilian deaths were lower in places that had high concentrations of autonomous organizations (Kaplan, 2013).⁴²

This finding suggests that supporting the ability of local communities to organize across sectarian divisions would challenge a key facet of ISIS strategy and help strengthen them in the event of a future ISIS attack. In Iraq, active shuttle diplomacy by a group of mediators from the Iraqi Facilitators Network helped prevent a sectarian-based spiraling of violence following the massacre, by ISIS, of 1700 Shi’a Iraqi air force cadets at Camp Speicher near the city of Tikrit in July 2014. The Iraqi mediators brought Sunni and Shi’a sheikhs and tribal elders together to denounce the killings, hold the perpetrators accountable, and to condemn further violence.⁴³ In Syria, Local Coordination Committees (LCCs) and local councils in those parts of Syria no longer controlled by government forces may be in the best position to organize preventatively.

⁴¹ Lister, “Profiling the Islamic State,” 25-29.

⁴² For example, see Kaplan, Oliver. 2013. “Nudging Armed Groups: How Civilians Transmit Norms of Protection.” *Stability: International Journal of Security and Development*, 2.3.

⁴³ Gienger, Viola. July 16 2015. “In the Shadow of a Massacre, a Peaceful Return in Iraq,” The Olive Branch. <http://www.usip.org/publications/2015/07/16/in-the-shadow-of-massacre-peaceful-return-in-iraq-part-i>.

Intangible factors

These are psychological, cultural, and ideological factors that promote obedience to and cooperation with power-holders. They may include habits, traditions, religious beliefs, language conventions, a sense of belonging, presence or absence of a common faith, ideology, or sense of mission.

ISIS is tapping into a number of intangibles – notably a desire for identity, belonging, and participation in a meaningful enterprise – to attract adherents and fighters. These elements, combined with ISIS’s coherent religious and political ideology, help to explain the group’s allure. ISIS promises excitement, adventure, and a glorious afterlife to those who join its ranks. For alienated Muslim youth in particular, the prospect of joining a seemingly powerful, mission-focused organization holds great appeal. Even some Muslim women, facing family and societal pressures and increasingly enabled by social media, are responding to ISIS’s call for active participation in the larger-than-life struggle of reconstructing a caliphate.⁴⁴

Undermining ISIS’s claim to be providing an honorable, dignified lifestyle to devout Muslims with poignant testimonials by ISIS defectors, their families, respected imams, and prominent cultural figures is only part of the battle. A longer-term effort needs to focus on developing alternative pathways to social and political participation for Muslim youth, in both the democracies and non-democratic states where ISIS messaging is resonating. While there is no simple answer to meaningful integration in European societies, it is difficult to imagine ISIS being nipped in the bud without a targeted social movement addressing the social, political, and economic malaise faced by communities vulnerable to ISIS recruitment.

Dissolving the roots of ISIS terrorism requires empowering people with the tools and narratives to challenge the injustices that give rise to violent extremism.⁴⁵ Disempowered youth need to be shown alterna-

⁴⁴ Brown, Katherine. October 6, 2014. “Analysis: Why Western Women are joining ISIS.” *BBC News*. <http://www.bbc.com/news/uk-29507410>.

⁴⁵ DuVall, Jack and Hardy Merriman. “Dissolving Terrorism at its Roots.” In Ralph Summy and Senthil Ram (eds.), *Nonviolence: An Alternative for Countering*

tive means to achieve social justice and political inclusion that involves fighting with different weapons. Using the rich history of Muslim and Arab-led nonviolent struggles⁴⁶ as a cultural referent, dramatizing these struggles and their leaders using popular media and educational tools, needs to be part of a longer-term solution to extremism.

Sanctions

This is punishment of those who disobey, typically by seizure of assets, imprisonment, or execution.

ISIS is infamous for its use of sanctions, often brutal, to terrorize the populations under their control and to deter dissent. Making ISIS's use of corporal punishment backfire, politically, would be the goal of any potential nonviolent action. According to Brian Martin, there are two conditions for "backfire". First, an action is perceived as unjust, unfair, excessive or disproportional. Second, information about the action is communicated to relevant audiences.⁴⁷

Certain ISIS actions have provoked counter-mobilization and resistance by those living under their control. For example, there have been isolated instances of ISIS releasing political prisoners in response to organized protests by women and others. While it is unlikely that core members of ISIS's punishment brigades will succumb to civic pressure, it is not unthinkable for lower-ranking foot soldiers to begin to question orders. The more organized and unified the community is, the greater the chance that such questioning, and potentially changed behavior, would occur.

Indirect influence through third parties, including counter-recruit-

Global Terror(ism), Hauppauge, NY: Nova Science Publishers, 2007.

⁴⁶ See, for example, Stephan, Maria J. (ed) *Civilian Jihad: Nonviolent Struggle, Democratization and Governance in the Middle East*. Palgrave Macmillan, 2009; Zunes, Stephen. "Nonviolent Resistance in the Islamic World," *Nonviolent Activist*. January-February 2002. <http://www.warresisters.org/nva/nva0102-1.htm>.

⁴⁷ Martin, Brian. "From political jiu-jitsu to the backfire dynamic: how repression can promote mobilization". In Kurt Schock (ed.), *Civil Resistance: Comparative Perspectives on Nonviolent Struggle* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2015), pp. 145-167

ers and popular personalities, can help expose the moral depravity of ISIS's use of sanctions. The more the organization relies on brutality (vice forms of cooptation) to rule over populations, the more vulnerable it is to other forms of non-cooperation. A trans-media campaign that exposes the moral hypocrisy of ISIS actions could help trigger backfire amongst Arab and Muslim populations. Beyond that, supporting victims of ISIS rape, torture, and imprisonment with psycho-social aid is critical to helping these individuals re-enter society.

Resisting Totalitarianism

ISIS keeps its grip on power by inserting itself in all aspects of societal life and by destroying any sort of autonomous political action. In this way, ISIS exhibits features of both a totalitarian regime and a socio-religious movement. As one analyst noted, “There’s nothing mediaeval about this mix of ruthless business enterprise, well-publicized savagery and transnational crime” (Gray, 2014).⁴⁸

German philosopher Hannah Arendt, in her compelling treatise on totalitarianism, described how these regimes combine ideological indoctrination, terror, and a sophisticated bureaucracy to maintain total domination over populations. Focusing on Nazi Germany and Stalinist Russia, Arendt described how totalitarian regimes destroy the public realm of politics and collective action, leaving victims isolated and atomized (de Waal, 2012: 132-33).⁴⁹ In his 2008 book *Hannah Arendt’s Response to the Crisis of Her Times*, Professor Anthony Court draws on the philosopher’s text and explains:

Wherever totalitarian regimes come into being they obliterate social, legal and political traditions, evolving new political institutions in accordance with ‘a system of values so radically different from all others, that none of our traditional legal, moral, or common sense utilitarian

⁴⁸ Gray, “A Point of View.”

⁴⁹ de Waal, Tamar. 2012. “Personal Responsibility Under Totalitarian Regimes: An Analysis of Hannah Arendt’s Philosophy on the Prevention of Evildoing and Criminal Liability for International Crime.” *Amsterdam Law Forum*. <http://amsterdamlawforum.org/article/viewFile/256/444>.

categories could any longer help us to come to terms with, or judge, or predict their course of action'... Total domination, as distinct from despotic or tyrannical forms of political oppression, rests on the perverse but 'seemingly unanswerable' claim that... far from being 'lawless', it goes to the source of authority from which positive laws received their ultimate legitimation, that far from being arbitrary it is more obedient to these supra-human forces than any government ever was before (2008: 165).⁵⁰

Totalitarian movements seek to create isolated individuals who pledge allegiance to rigid ideologies, which are strictly closed systems of thought that exploit history and justify their policies. They set up bureaucratic infrastructure that turn people into administrative cogs and deploy terror to dis-incentivize any form of challenge or dissent.

Those who aspire to total domination must liquidate all spontaneity, such as mere existence of individuality will always engender, and track it down in its most private forms, regardless of how un-political and harmless these may seem (Arendt, 1973: 456).

As ISIS grew in power inside Syria, it first took on the other armed groups fighting against the Assad regime, including the Free Syrian Army (FSA). After killing off some competitors and co-opting others, ISIS took over entire cities, like Raqqa, through fatwas, or Islamic dictates given by religious authority. The organization then systematically cracked down on autonomous activity. Suad Nofel, who led the nonviolent protests against ISIS in Raqqa, noted that ISIS broke down the doors to her women's organization, "Jina," in order to prevent any civil gathering or organization that wasn't under its control.

Arendt's ruminations about totalitarianism and its vulnerabilities are instructive in terms of possible civil resistance responses to ISIS. As Anthony Court wrote, once again drawing upon Arendt's own words, '[t]he greatest threat to totalitarian rule, and the main target of total terror, is human spontaneity or 'man's power to begin something new out of

⁵⁰ Court drew from the 1979 version of Hannah Arendt's *The Origins of Totalitarianism*.

his own resources, something that cannot be explained on the basis of reactions to environment and events' (2008: 142).

Arendt recognized that human agency and eruptions of spontaneous political action are threatening to totalitarian regimes. This type of political action is extremely difficult in full-blown totalitarian dictatorships. However, it is not unimaginable. We have seen spontaneous outbursts of protest activity lead to small victories in ISIS-controlled parts of Iraq and Syria. These incidents should be further studied and support models developed based on an analysis of what allowed the local communities to exert effective leverage over ISIS.

Conclusion: Supporting autonomous civic action

If ISIS perpetuates its totalitarian-esque control by blocking any sort of autonomous collective action, then the civil resistance antidote is to support self-organization in various forms. An organized population that demonstrates the ability and inclination to act independently of ISIS dictates is a threat to that organization. Local organization can take different forms – protests and direct confrontations with ISIS are only two options and may be inappropriate in many cases.

Helping Syrians and Iraqis create parallel structures and institutions is how outsiders - governments and international non-governmental organizations - can support community resiliency and subtle forms of non-cooperation with ISIS. Practically, this entails providing educational materials and medical supplies to Iraqi and Syrian men and women who may be leading underground schools and medical clinics. It means offering trauma support to those who have been victimized by ISIS and are struggling to re-enter normal life. It means supporting alternative media and communication channels and getting non-ISIS news and information into the territories it controls and in adjacent territories. This entails supporting authentic local and regional voices with the cultural heft and legitimacy to challenge the absurdity of ISIS tyranny.

Attempting to dismantle ISIS without addressing the severe governance failures and venal corruption that fueled its rise is futile. The civil war in Syria is the greatest humanitarian catastrophe of our time. The

displacement, destruction, and despair resulting from the war, spurred on by dictatorial criminality and regional proxy conflicts, gave rise to ISIS in Syria and are sustaining its presence there. A political solution to the Syrian civil war that includes a regional accord involving Iran and Saudi Arabia, and a greater investment in those Syrian individuals and organizations that are capable of mediating across conflict lines, may be the only way to eliminate ISIS in the long term. In addition, strengthening inclusive, representative governance in Iraq, Libya, Tunisia and other countries that have spawned ISIS recruits will help dry up the roots of violent extremism.

In both the short and long terms, the role of organized civilians in challenging extremist, totalitarian ideology and subverting its power sources is neither negligible nor insignificant. Countering extremist narratives by amplifying local and regional voices capable of making a compelling religious, social and cultural case against ISIS is an important role for outside actors. Counter-narratives, in turn, should be backed by organized collective action and support for autonomous political, economic, and social activities. Investing in the strengthening of this type of people power is relevant not only for the fight against ISIS, but for the injustices and governance failures that catapulted its rapid spread.

Reading List (Books and Academic Articles on Civil Resistance vs. Terrorism)

Bartkowski, Maciej. December 2014. "Can Political Struggle Against ISIS Succeed Where Violence Cannot?" *War on the Rocks*.

Hastings, Tom H. 2004. *Nonviolent Responses to Terrorism*. Jefferson, North Carolina: McFarland.

Hastings, Tom H. 2014. *A New Era of Nonviolence: The Power of Civil Society Over War*. McFarland. Jefferson, North Carolina: McFarland.

Kaplan, Oliver. December 2013. "Nudging Armed Groups: How Civilians Transmit Norms of Protection." *Stability: International Journal of Security and Development*. Volume 2, Issue 3.

Martin, Brian. Autumn 2002. "Nonviolence versus Terrorism," *Social Alternatives*, Vol. 21, No. 2, pp. 6-9

Ram, Senthil and Ralph Summy (ed.). 2007. *Nonviolence: An Alternative for Defeating Global Terror*. New York: Nova Science Publishers.

Semelin, Jacques. 1993. *Unarmed Against Hitler: Civil Resistance in Europe 1939-43*. Praeger.

Sørensen, Majken Jul. 2008. "Humor as a Serious Strategy of Nonviolent Resistance to Oppression." *Peace & Change*, 33.2: 167-190.

References

Abdelaziz, Salma. October 24, 2013. "In Northern Syria, Rebels Use Satire as a Weapon." *CNN*. <http://www.cnn.com/2013/10/22/world/syria-war-satire/>.

Almukhtar, Sarah. May 19, 2015. "ISIS Finances are Strong." *The New York Times*. http://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2015/05/19/world/middleeast/isis-finances.html?_r=0.

Arendt, Hannah. 1979. *The Origins of Totalitarianism*. San Diego: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt.

Bartkowski, Maciej. December 20, 2014. "Can Political Struggle Against ISIL Succeed Where Violence Cannot." *War on the Rocks*. <http://warontherocks.com/2014/12/can-political-struggle-against-isil-succeed-where-violence-cannot/>.

Callimachi, Rukmini. August 13, 2015. "ISIS Enshrines a Theology of Rape." *The New York Times*. http://www.nytimes.com/2015/08/14/world/middleeast/isis-enshrines-a-theology-of-rape.html?emc=edit_na_20150813&nlid=64560341&ref=cta&_r=1.

Court, Anthony. 2008. *Hannah Arendt's Response to the Crisis of Her Times*. Amsterdam: Rozenberg Publishers.

Cullinane, Susannah, Hamdi Alkhshali and Mohammed Twfeeq. April 13, 2015. "Tracking a Trail of Historical Destruction. ISIS Trumpets Destruction of Nimrud." *CNN*. <http://www.cnn.com/2015/03/09/world/iraq-isis-heritage/>.

Dettmer, Jamie. July 9, 2014. "Al Qaeda to ISIS: Get Off My Lawn – The Theological Debate Behind the Caliphate." *The Daily Beast*. <http://www.thedailybeast.com/articles/2014/07/09/al-qaeda-to-isis-get-off-my-lawn-the-theological-debate-behind-the-caliphate.html>.

de Waal, Tamar. 2012. "Personal Responsibility Under Totalitarian Regimes: An Analysis of Hannah Arendt's Philosophy on the Prevention of Evildoing and Criminal Liability for International Crime." *Amsterdam Law Forum*. <http://amsterdamlawforum.org/article/viewFile/256/444>.

Fallows, James. February 15, 2015. "On the Impossibility of Fighting ISIS." *The Atlantic*. <http://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2015/02/on-the-impossibility-of-fighting-isis/385530/>.

Gray, John. July 11, 2014. "A Point of View: ISIS and What it Means to be Modern." *BBC*. <http://www.bbc.com/news/magazine-28246732>.

Hall, John. September 1, 2014. "ISIS Jihadis Blowing Themselves Up and Rejecting Radio as Un-Islamic – Welcome to Iraqi TV's Cartoon Satire on Terror." *Daily Mail*. <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-2739534/ISIS-jihadis-blowing-rejecting-radio-Islamic-welcome-Iraqi-TVs-cartoon-satire-terror.html>.

Hashim, Ahmed S. December 2014. "The Islamic State: From al-Qaeda Affiliate to Caliphate," *Middle East Policy*, 21.4: 69-83.

Hastings, Tom H. 2014. *A New Era of Nonviolence: The Power of Civil Society Over War*. McFarland. Jefferson, North Carolina: McFarland.

"Jihadi Trails: The Circuitous Routes Foreigners Take to Syria and Iraq." Edited by Crowley, John and Tom Mudd. *Wall Street Journal*. <http://graphics.wsj.com/jihadi-trails/?mod=e2tw>.

Kaplan, Oliver. 2013. "Nudging Armed Groups: How Civilians Transmit Norms of Protection." *Stability: International Journal of Security and Development*, 2.3.

Kesvani, Hussein. August 24, 2015. "This Twitter Account is Hilariously Mocking ISIS with Popular Karaoke Songs." *BuzzFeed News*. <http://www.buzzfeed.com/husseinkesvani/isis-karaoke-twitter-account#.jsr036qLx>

Lewis, Jessica D. July 2014. “The Islamic State: A Counter Strategy for a Counter-State.” Institute for the Study of War. <http://www.understandingwar.org/sites/default/files/Lewis-Center%20of%20gravity.pdf>.

Martin, Brian. 1989. “Gene Sharp’s Theory of Power.” *Journal of Peace Research*, 26.2: 213-22. <http://www.bmartin.cc/pubs/89jpr.html>.

Neumann, Peter R. August 16, 2015. “Smart and Realistic: Defeating ISIS through a Strategy of “Aggressive Containment.”” Informal Institute for National Security Thinkers and Practitioners. <http://maxoki161.blogspot.com/2015/08/smart-and-realistic-defeating-isis.html>.

Peck, Michael. July 9, 2014. “Sorry, Peaceniks – Nonviolence Won’t Stop ISIS.” *Medium*. <https://medium.com/war-is-boring/sorry-peaceniks-nonviolence-wont-stop-isis-de96bc546019>.

Pischedda, Costantino. August 27, 2015. “A Provocative Article Says the Islamic State is a Mystery. Here’s Why That’s Wrong.” *The Washington Post*. <http://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/monkey-cage/wp/2015/08/27/the-islamic-state-is-no-mystery/>.

Roth, Kenneth. August 5, 2015. “Barrel Bombs, Not ISIS, Are the Greatest Threat to Syrians.” Human Rights Watch. <https://www.hrw.org/news/2015/08/05/barrel-bombs-not-isis-are-greatest-threat-syrians>.

Sergie, Mohammed Aly et al. August 2015. “The Sunni-Shia Divide.” The Council on Foreign Relations. http://www.cfr.org/peace-conflict-and-human-rights/sunni-shia-divide/p33176#!/?cid=otr-marketing_url-sunni_shia_infoguide#resources.

Sharp, Gene. 2013. “How Nonviolent Struggle Works.” The Albert Einstein Institution. <http://www.aeinstein.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/01/How-Nonviolent-Struggle-Works.pdf>.

Sharp, Gene. 1990. “The Role of Power in Nonviolent Struggle.” The Albert Einstein Institution. <http://www.aeinstein.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/09/TheRoleofPowerinNonviolentStruggle-English.pdf>.

Sørensen, Majken Jul and Brian Martin. 2014. “The Dilemma Action: Analysis of an Activist Technique.” *Peace & Change*, 39.1: 73-100.

Sørensen, Majken Jul. 2008. "Humor as a Serious Strategy of Nonviolent Resistance to Oppression." *Peace & Change*, 33.2: 167-190.

Stephan, Maria J. April 2015. "Resisting ISIS." *Sojourners*. <https://sojo.net/magazine/april-2015/resisting-isis>.

Stern, Jessica and J.M. Berger. March 8, 2015. "ISIS and the Foreign-Fighter Phenomenon." *The Atlantic*. <http://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2015/03/isis-and-the-foreign-fighter-problem/387166/>.

Taleb, Julia. August 22, 2014. "From Assad to ISIS: A Tale of Syrian Resistance." *Waging Nonviolence*. <http://wagingnonviolence.org/feature/assad-isis-tale-resistance/>.

Van Langendonck, Gert. July 8, 2015. "For Syrian Activist Group, Resisting the Islamic State isn't about Making War." *McClatchy DC*. <http://www.mcclatchydc.com/news/nation-world/world/middle-east/article26745517.html>

de Waal, Tamar. 2012. "Personal Responsibility Under Totalitarian Regimes: An Analysis of Hannah Arendt's Philosophy on the Prevention of Evildoing and Criminal Liability for International Crime." *Amsterdam Law Forum*. 131-142. <http://amsterdamlawforum.org/article/viewFile/256/444>.

Wood, Graeme. March 2015. "What ISIS Really Wants." *The Atlantic*. <http://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2015/03/what-isis-really-wants/384980/>.