Beyond Arms and Beards: Local Governance of ISIS in Syria

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The current situation in Syria presents complex governance dynamics. Its ongoing conflict is described as a mix of proxy regional and international wars, civil wars, and popular uprisings against authoritarianism. Between state-failure and war economy, this has rendered civil society in Syria a "conflict society" – an arena where multiple actors, both civil and uncivil, co-exist and compete. Thus, governance in Syria has come to be shaped by local and international interests, as well as by civil and uncivil actors (Khalaf, 2014).

Civil actors are a key component of a revived civil society in Syria. However, their agency, roles, and challenges are very different to those in peaceful democratic states. 'Local Coordination Committees' and local social movements have promoted civil disobedience against authoritarianism represented by the regime, sharia courts, armed groups, and other power perpetrators. These have delayed societal rifts along ethnic and sectarian lines. Others have worked on peace building and conflict resolution. Citizen journalists have raised awareness on human rights abuses. 'Local Councils' have alleviated human suffering by replacing the void created by the absent government in their provision of key public services. Local humanitarian organisations have provided food and shelter to affected populations. Other groups have been working on a variety of projects related to awareness creation, advocacy, development, and human rights, to the name but a few (Khalaf, et al., 2014; Khalaf, 2014). The challenges of this emerging civil society are many. Despite its goal of promoting a future inclusive democratic state, it has been diverted to respond to the conflict and its dire humanitarian needs first (Khalaf, et al., 2014). Meanwhile, it remains weak and fragmented and much limited. This is attributed to structural issues normally faced by civil societies under authoritarian rules, in addition to new limitations like its lack of security, resources, and support in the face of uncivil forces (Khalaf, 2014).

Uncivil actors in the Syrian conflict seem to be stronger than their civil counterparts. These include forces that do not share common causes and values for tolerance, justice, exclusion of violence, etc., which characterise the "civil" in civil society (Fischer, 2006). While uncivil actors have money, arms, and power, their networks extend beyond Syria to include nodes in other countries. These seem to be part of the agenda of new wars where the aim of violence is not so much directed against the 'enemy'; rather, it is to expand their networks to control territory through political and military means (Kaldor, 2003). Their technique is terror; violence against civilians is their deliberate war strategy (Kaldor, 2003). Soft power is also critical to this technique.

The Islamic State in Iraq and Greater Syria (ISIS) is one of these most powerful uncivil forces in Syria. ISIS is a predominantly jihadist group manipulating the country's instability to establish a caliphate – a single, transnational 'Islamic State' based on sharia (Zachary Laub, 2014). The group is said to have emerged in 2006 after the US-led invasion of Iraq. It appears to be a product of the Islamic State of Iraq, established by several Iraqi al-Qaeda-based or affiliated groups (Kfir, 2014). Whether ISIS has ever been affiliated with al-Qaeda beyond sharing work and resources is mired with controversy (Kfir, 2014). However, overt enmity between the two broke out in full in April 2014 (Zelin, 2014). Since then, ISIS has come to be even more extreme than al-Qaeda. At odds with al-Qaeda, ISIS seeks to expand its territorial control and establish a 'de facto' state in the borderlands of Syria and Iraq (Zachary

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Laub, 2014).

The brutality of ISIS and its ability to govern and expand has alarmed the international community that remains incapable of dealing with it effectively. Currently, a US-led anti-ISIS coalition of over 64 nations and groups continues to launch airstrikes in Syria and Iraq against it and other Islamist groups in the aim of weakening the group (National Post, 2014). However, according to local activists on the ground, this is only serving to expand the legitimacy of ISIS [1]. Some locals have since then moved their support to the group because their security and livelihoods have not been spared the striking. Rather, they are more in danger by both the coalition and the regime's shelling. This has promoted ISIS as the main group providing them with a form of security in contradiction to the international community. The latter is perceived as preaching human rights values that are never translated to any action to protect them, particularly as they continue to be targeted by the regime. This has expanded the acceptance of ISIS, and thus its governance ability. Consequently, without sufficient understanding of the governance dynamics of ISIS on the ground, efficacious policies will remain far-fetched. It is crucial to first understand how ISIS uses soft power, beyond its militarisation, to rule local populations in areas it controls.

The Governance Model during Conflict

Studies on rebel groups in conflict suggest that "for a certain actor to govern, the governed must comply" (Keister & L. Slantchev, 2014). Coercion is a main factor in creating compliance, as physical and nutritional security may overwhelm other interests. However, civilians do have room to manoeuvre above a certain level. Considered as political actors, they have preferences and are capable of resisting and shaping their governor's governance tools.

The model developed in this study builds on three key governance tools that seem to facilitate the governability of local actors beyond coercion; these are effectiveness, legitimacy, and security. During conflict, locals perceive these differently from their international counterparts [2] – an issue that could explain the failure of international actors in dealing with conflict situations. At the local level during conflict, based on literature (Brikerhoff, 2005; Edwards, 2010; Mac Ginty, 2011; Roberts, 2011; Zoellick, 2008; Khalaf, 2014), this study defines these factors as follows:

Effectiveness: This is related to the regular and equitable provision of basic needs like electricity, water, food, jobs, etc. It also extends to cover more sustainable measures related to regenerating an economic cycle and livelihood opportunities.

Security: This is related to the capability to secure civilian lives. It involves managing security and order on the ground in a systematic, rather than ad hoc, manner. This is achieved via the creation, maintenance, and management of the relevant state functions of the police, judicial system, and armed groups. It also extends to defending infrastructure and sources of livelihood like power lines, pipelines, roads, and homes from looting and destruction.

Legitimacy: This refers to a social compact or complex set of beliefs and values (internal and external) governing state-society relations. It involves relationships, processes, and procedures. Part of these is also the capacity-related legitimacy, which relates to the provision of basic services and security measures in an accountable manner to citizens.

The Governance Dynamics of ISIS [3]

Coercion: ISIS has used and continues to use coercion, both directly and indirectly, to expand its control in Syria. In Al-Raqqa, for instance, ISIS has eliminated all local armed groups by either sending them out of the city or by forcing them to surrender to it via a *Bayaa* [4] (Khalaf, 2014). It also continues to ruthlessly punish individuals or groups opposing it. This is the fate of many civil society activists who have been detained, killed, or forced to leave the city (Khalaf, et al., 2014). ISIS's brutal and public punishment of its victims is an indirect form of coercion and warning of its ruthlessness to non-compliers. The ugly massacres it has carried against Al-Shaitat tribe that resisted it5 were deliberate to market its coercive capability. These ensured that other tribes sought to pledge a *Bayaa* to ISIS or to reach negotiated deals with it. Meanwhile, the coercion mechanisms of ISIS extend to the forcible collection of taxes,

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seizure of houses, manipulation of livelihood sources, and control of resources such as oil, to name but a few examples. As such, non-compliance and resistance to ISIS is extremely risky and costly to the locals.

Nonetheless, while their choices are not free from coercion, it seems that in some cases civilians have unforcedly opted for compliance to ISIS, rather than to other powerful armed groups. In the recent fights in Dair Ezzor between ISIS and Al-Nusra Font (an al-Qaeda-affiliated group), the locals, including the Free Syrian Army fighters, have chosen not to side with any of the two warring groups. As ISIS took over the city later on, it managed to win compliance from the locals. A key factor is not only its brutality, but also its better capability than its alternatives – be it other armed groups or 'local councils' – to provide effectiveness and security on the ground. In Dair Ezzor, before the invasion of ISIS, Al-Nusra Font has had strong governance over the city. However, Al-Nusra's ability to provide effectiveness in the provision of public goods and security on the ground has been crippling with corruption. In comparison to it, ISIS seemed to be the more legitimate and viable alternative of the two evils. As such, the non-coercive governance tools of ISIS shall be assessed below.

Effectiveness: Effectiveness in the provision of services generates more loyalty and compliance to those governing. This makes the rule of the governor more palatable. It causes less resentment for a slight increase in coercion. It may even generate voluntary support to them (Keister & L. Slantchev, 2014). ISIS is a typical example regarding these dynamics in the Syrian conflict. Across Syria's non-government controlled areas, ISIS is described as the most capable and efficient group in the provision of key social services to the locals. This is attributed to its well-structured institutions that are governed by a rigid set of rules and supported by massive resources.

With its sharia court, ISIS covers a wide array of state executive work in Al-Raqqa. This ranges from the provision of public goods and humanitarian aid, to the enforcement of its own form of law and justice system, and to the control of other aspects of the citizen's life. The latter includes housing policies, commercial laws, civil affairs, etc. ISIS's sharia court has offices and appointed personnel to a variety of these state functions. It even covers tribal affairs with its tribe's office to co-opt tribal members and preempt any regional efforts from organising tribes against it (Hassan, 2014b). Meanwhile, it has backed its sharia court with its 'Islamic Police' (Khalaf, 2014). This serves to ensure its policies and laws are effective and implemented. In support of this police is its strong state-like military, which is mainly composed of *muhajireen* or migrants. These have come from across the world to fight for the 'Islamic State'.

Meanwhile, as the provision of these services is costly, as a shadow state, ISIS has managed to expand its resources beyond its cross-border funding. The group depends on a well-planned war economy. It feeds off resources it has looted, and controls oil wells and flour-mills. Critically, it also collects income from taxes it imposes on locals (as Zakat), who, in their turn have complied. Many of them – especially the poor – have benefitted from the services provided by ISIS. This ranges from dispute management, to job placement, to food and shelter provision. In fact, locals in Al-Raqqa recount that, with the presence of ISIS, a form of a new economic cycle has been created in the city. For instance, as the only currency ISIS deals with is US dollars, currency exchange traders have mushroomed in the city center. Additionally, locals speak of food products in local shops like dates and honey that they have never seen before under the regime control. Thus, if civilians could ever choose between ISIS and an alternative, the weight of these services is a main factor they would consider. Meanwhile, ISIS coercion renders supporting alternatives to it more risky and costly.

Security: More than any other armed group, ISIS takes security on the ground seriously. In adhering to strict ideological rules, the group does not hesitate to use brutal force to ensure security maintenance. It first seeks to monopolise violence in the area it controls. In Al-Raqqa, it has managed to abolish all other local armed groups with its strong and highly trained jihadi fighters' military. It then became the only provider of security on the ground with its Islamic Police as its implementing arm and sharia court as the policy maker or 'state'. When not totally in control of an area, ISIS first appeals to locals exhausted by the conflict's chaos and insecurity, by focussing on eradicating groups behind looting. It then uses a mix of coercion and soft power to take full control of territory. This was the case in rural Dair Ezzor before ISIS expanded its control to take over Dair Ezzor city. It was also the case in Aleppo before ISIS was expelled from it by the more powerful and legitimate Jaish Al Mujahideen group.

Meanwhile, as it continues to lack legitimacy on the ground due to its brutality and non-local identity, ISIS and its

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institutions are perceived as a protection from the chaos created by state failure and conflict. The locals, many of whom do not necessarily agree to its ideology and extremism, started using its court and police services, as these ensured their security. Additionally, the mere control of ISIS to a certain area is seen as a security measure from the random barrels of the regime. For instance, since the beginning of ISIS control of it, Al-Raqqa has rarely been targeted by the regime.

On the other end, due to its use of violence against the locals themselves, ISIS continues to be seen by many locals as personal security threat. On a small scale, it continues to be faced by non-violent and violent local resistance. Civil society actors have been fostering civil disobedience against it. Others have been targeting and killing its jihadi members at night, when entering neighbourhoods heavily populated by locals. ISIS is not blind to the fact that its brutality has ensured it is affecting the acceptance of local to it (Khalaf, 2014). To solve this issue, it has focused on its capacity to gain legitimacy. ISIS has been promoting a more palatable form of citizenship than that of corrupt leaders and regimes in Syria and Iraq. Once citizens of its 'Islamic State' abide by its rules, locals are promised security – physical, economic, social, and religious (Kfir, 2014). This citizenship is palatable because ISIS has indeed managed to provide immediate physical security. Unlike other rebel groups, it has at least provided the promise of eventual economic security (Kfir, 2014).

Legitimacy: Beyond its capacity-related legitimacy, ISIS understands that its brutal processes and procedures against the locals continue to limit its legitimacy. This is especially the case as its extremist beliefs and values are far from the average Sunni local in Syria. Even so, ISIS does not intend to change its ways or its strict ideology. Rather, it seeks to increase its legitimacy by either co-opting the locals by building relationships with them, or by changing their ideology towards it.

With regards to its relationship-building efforts, as areas it controls are mainly tribal, ISIS pays particular focus on tribal affairs. To manipulate them with a divide-and-rule tactic, it seems to build on its long experience in operating amongst tribes. Hassan (2014) explains this process: understanding local social and tribal rivalry and hostility to each other, ISIS has been successful in pitting tribes and members of a tribe against each other. First, it has secretly sought the loyalty of and alliance with influential tribal leaders. With these then came pledges that include sharing financial revenues for the promotion of tribal figures to future influential positions at the expense of existing leaders. Thus, by empowering tribes to govern their own state of affairs in allegiance to it, ISIS seems to be indirectly managing some of them. On an analysis of *Dabiq*, ISIS's online magazine, Gambhir (2014) summarizes that, as the authority of ISIS continued to expand, tribes themselves started seeking to allege a "Bayaa" to it. In doing so, tribes benefit from ISIS's aid and non-coercion in return for complying with it. Militarily, this is by providing financial aid, fighters, and weapons to ISIS. Politically, this is via tax contribution (zakat) (Gambhir, 2014). In this manner, ISIS has ensured it reaps maximum benefit from its relationship with the tribes while building a difficult-to-break authority over them.

Regarding its ideological infiltration efforts, ISIS has sought to persuade the locals into its ideology. Its leaders seem to understand the core of the theory of Keister and Slantchev (2014), which suggests that, while they may not be able to articulate it, civilians do have ideological preferences – over their relationship with the state, religion, land reform, etc. The ideological distance between those governing and the preferences of these citizens, rather than the ideology itself, is key in governability. It makes civilians sceptical about the intentions of those governing, and thus less cooperative with them. This is despite the effectiveness of those governing in the provision of services and security.

To minimise this ideological distance, ISIS has been working on diverting local ideology towards its own by investing heavily in justifying its religious ideology and rival organisations. ISIS continues to produce religious, military, and political arguments to market the correctness and ultimate solidity and victory of its Islamic State (Gambhir, 2014). It backs these by its political institutions and by a sound media strategy. The most evident example of this is the ISIS online magazine *Dabiq*. *Dabiq* eloquently articulates the vision of ISIS, justifies its authority, forwards its arguments, and highlights its progress to its followers (Gambhir, 2014). Building on religious justification, it aims to build the religious legitimacy of ISIS and its 'Islamic State', while encouraging Muslims to emigrate there (Gambhir, 2014). Albeit extreme, the discourse of this 'Islamic State' may increasingly appeal to those whom world human rights, democracy, and other ideological discourses have failed them as they continue to face death, torture, and losses at

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all levels by predatory nation-states.

Policy Implications

Theoretically, Keister and Stantchev (2014) suggest that foreign sponsors and domestic counterinsurgency efforts may challenge rebel governance dynamics by changing their relative costs of coercion and service provision. In pursuing these changes, the model highlights that international policymakers and donors are at a dilemma. While military assistance may be critical to press the government, this may increase human rights violations and radicalise rebels, as it lowers the price of coercion. Conversely, while much needed, humanitarian aid might enable rebels to take advantage of more-affordable service provision, thus boasting their governance, even if radical. Accordingly, the model recommends that donors 'tame' rebels by inducing them to relatively more moderate ideologies and actions through the form and amount of aid they offer.

Seemingly, many donors in Syria have adhered to this recommendation. The implications of increased aid-related radicalisation are real and need not be ignored. However, what the model misses is that when moderate forces (albeit difficult to define) lose military and service support, governance moves to other, better-resourced extreme forces like ISIS. Thus, the implications of holding resources from other viable alternatives to radical groups are also critical. To balance the power dynamics, support can also come in other forms than what is military or humanitarian, and to other local actors, like civil society actors, who could better hold rebels accountable. Without sufficient support, civil society will continue to face resource, financial, and security limitations. Thus, to ensure aid effectiveness, local grassroots civil society on the ground needs to be supported. Dair Ezzor provides a good illustration of this shortcoming of the international approach in dealing with governance dynamics in Syria. Right upon the overtake of Dair Ezzor by ISIS, many donors have held back their support to local civil society actors and 'local councils' out of fear of 'funding terrorism' if resources become redirected to ISIS. However, these policies are limiting, on the other hand, the capacity of other alternatives to ISIS to provide public goods effectively and, thus, to challenge ISIS's governance.

Another critical governance aspect the international community is missing on in Syria is security. International actors seem to be more involved in their own security from ISIS's expansion and terrorist influx to their countries, rather than the security of the locals in Syria (Khalaf, 2014). At a greater level, and on a longer period to that faced by ISIS, the security of Syrian civilians on the ground has been and continues to be targeted by the regime's random shelling. However, the international community has opted for only an anti-ISIS coalition that yet again ignores the regime. Such international actions have come to be seen by the locals as increasing the coercive capability of the regime (Ian & Mona , 2014). This is triggering a local reaction in support of ISIS (Hassan, 2014), which, albeit brutal, is at least working on the provision of security on the ground.

On a more positive note, it seems one governance factor ISIS has not yet well mastered is legitimacy. International policy can serve to further weaken the legitimacy of ISIS by supporting local alternatives to it that are civil and inclusive. Capacity-related legitimacy may be promoted by supporting effective service delivery via local councils and civil society simultaneously. It could be furthered with re-constituting security on the ground by primarily protecting the locals and their institutions from the random shelling of the regime. Meanwhile, although as far-fetched a dream as that of global civil society, the credibility of human rights values in the face of extremism needs to be reconstructed and applied impartially against power perpetrators ranging from the regime to ISIS to international actors who have supported human rights violations. Following these procedures, the locals will have more motivation and may face less risk and costs in rising against ISIS. Without understanding and investing in these local dynamics alongside the international dynamics sustainability ISIS, anti-ISIS plans are doomed to fail.

Notes

[1] See also (Ian & Mona, 2014) and (Hassan, 2014a).

[2] For further explanation on how international actors perceive governance in Syria, see (Khalaf, Governance without Government in Syria: Civil Society and State-Building during Conflict, 2014).

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[3] This section relies on primary data from interviews with local civil activists unless otherwise stated.

[4] See (The Washington Post, 2014).

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