

Introduction

The Caliphate brings together all Muslims, it brings together the Syrian, the Iraqi, the Yemeni, the Egyptian, the European, the American and the African; it brings together the Arabs and the non-Arabs; it brings together the Hanafī, the Shāfi‘ī, the Mālīkī and the Ḥanbalī; so come to your Caliphate!

—Abū Muḥammad al-‘Adnānī, *Hādha wa‘d Allāh*

It is undeniable that the Islamic State,¹ especially its fighters but also its bureaucrats and all other supporters, brought unimaginable distress to many people who lived within the group’s sphere of influence. As participants in violent conflicts in Iraq and Syria, but also beyond, in Egypt, Libya, Afghanistan, Nigeria and many other places, fighters of the Islamic State and its allies displaced, robbed, humiliated, tortured and killed people and left many places totally destroyed. In addition, the group used many of these acts for its media work and committed some crimes only in order to produce images and play with the horror of the audience. It is therefore understandable without qualification when some observers denigrate members of the Islamic State as a gang of bloodthirsty terrorists abusing Islamic traditions for money, power or even lower motives. From a somewhat safe distance, it may be possible neither to relate to the grief caused by the Islamic State’s followers among so many people, nor to continually direct our attention to the tremendous effort that is post-violence reconciliation. In this book I will, however, attempt to better understand a widely ignored yet powerful force shaping violent conflicts, and thus the Islamic State’s emergence and rise: social identities. Given the fact that this religio-political actor has proved to be

Entrepreneurs of Identity

The Islamic State’s Symbolic Repertoire

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one of the most powerful contenders for state power in Iraq since 2003 and in Syria since 2011, I hope to offer a new perspective on how the Islamic State successfully manoeuvred within the war-torn environment of these two countries, and was able to present itself, at least temporarily, as the best available alternative to existing orders in the eyes of many people.

This book puts forward the hypothesis that the successful establishment of the Islamic State is due not least to its identity politics, that is, to the offer of existential and ontological security articulated by the ideologues of the Islamic State and its predecessors under the paradigm of ‘righteous’ Sunni Muslimness and a revival of the caliphate. I hence seek to examine some of the ways in which the Islamic State’s ideologues attempt to create, coordinate and control a shared sense of ‘we-ness’ through categories of social identity. Studying a wide dossier of original texts, speeches, images and videos, I trace the ways in which the Islamic State’s ideologues use memories of the past and the history of the Muslim community (umma) to make claims in the present and for the future through normative appeals to potential members of this larger social collective.

To describe and interpret the epistemic and ontological orientation they offer, I refer to the Islamic State’s ideologues and its wider leadership as ‘entrepreneurs of identity’. I understand entrepreneurs of identity as social actors who harness social identities to establish and preserve their claims to authority. This concept originated in studies from the fields of sociology and social psychology, where it is used to describe social actors who engage in the construction of social identities in order to influence individuals and orchestrate collective behaviour.² Examining similar figurations of human interaction, social anthropologist Günther Schlee (2008: 29) has termed group leaders who engage in manipulating collective identities ‘virtuosi of identity manipulation.’³ Building on these studies’ efforts, I want to further develop this concept, taking the Islamic State’s ideologues and wider leadership as a case in point to describe the ways in which entrepreneurs of identity aim equally to influence individual conceptions of the self and its relation to others and to manipulate intergroup processes. Employing their material or immaterial capabilities, or both, they seek to offer what Malešević (2011: 283) terms ‘ideologically articulated cognitive maps’, that is, structured and coherent narratives about their actions, norms, values and beliefs on the basis of which individuals can meaningfully decipher any social and political fact or development. Promoting dogmatically sealed, ‘sacralised’, uncompromisable and emotionally laden interpretations of the situation of conflict in Iraq and Syria, the group’s ideologues not only render religion as such, but specifically the ‘true’ enactment of ‘pristine’ Islam, as what Koschorke (2011: 37) describes as a ‘master-signifier’, which becomes the only decisive criterion of semantic, iconographic and behavioural distinction and thus helps to justify and enable understanding of rifts in the social framework.

Proposing this conceptual framework, I hope to draw attention to a hitherto understudied perspective on the question of why it was precisely this group that successfully filled the identity gap produced by the delusional failure of exogenous state-building in Iraq after 2003, as well as the ambiguous misuse of sectarian narratives by the al-Asad regime in Syria. So far, research on the Islamic State's establishment and expansion has mainly focused on the roles of former members of the Baath party, the Iraqi security apparatus and foreign fighters in the Islamic State's forces and bureaucracy;⁴ the group's economic organisation and state-building efforts;⁵ and its claim to and exercise of authority.⁶ Such exogenous factors are undoubtedly highly relevant for the development of the group, as well as for its assessment of social and political facts and developments. The epistemological interest of this book, however, evolves around the Islamic State's discursive, symbolic and iconographic strategies, used by the group's ideologues to offer orientation – thus, around more endogenous aspects of social action. In part, these elements play a role in studies of the Islamic State's media and its production and dissemination, which are concerned with aesthetic practices and media rhetoric used to address specific audiences,⁷ and the ways in which people articulate their stance towards Jihadi-Salafi actors online.⁸ In addition, psychosocial aspects inform analyses of the variables that regulate support of,⁹ as well as resilience or resistance against, violent actors on a local, regional and global scale,¹⁰ and facilitate or hinder reconciliation in a post-war environment.¹¹ Other scholars have examined the ways in which militant Jihadi-Salafi groups establish a particular nomenclature¹² and employ ḥadīth literature and specific concepts drawn from Islamic intellectual history,¹³ and the role that broader cultural items such as poetry play in their sense of self and others (Hegghammer 2017), as part of a cultural “tool kit” of symbols, rituals and traditions that includes violence as a force of demarcation of social collectives.¹⁴

Building on the above efforts, this book seeks to contribute to the literature on identity politics in general and identity-building in the Jihadi-Salafi current in particular by focusing on the epistemic and ontological orientation offered by the Islamic State's ideologues. I argue that as a backbone of and addition to the (often violent) exertion of authority that determined the group's relative success in assembling a powerful fighting force, establishing a quasi-state and attracting large groups of people far beyond Iraq and Syria, the Islamic State's leadership has put significant intellectual effort into establishing and preserving intragroup solidarity. This study thus analyses the ways in which the group's leadership seeks to build intragroup coherence through deploying ‘fortified’ and essentialised categories of social identity as an epistemic and ontological framework. Based on this framework, so I will show, they offer plausible and meaningful appraisals of social and political events and facts, justify a claim to authority and various resources, seek to stimulate processes of social closure and strive to generate conformity.

Although it is clear that the group repeatedly appeals to broad circles of its Muslim audience, its rigorous ideas are not geared towards the inclusion of large sections of the Muslim umma. The cohesive force designed on the basis of certain beliefs, norms, values and practices is rather aimed at the formation of an elitist circle whose social solidarity is nurtured by the idea of a purified Sunni Muslim identity.

My discussion is built on a wide dossier of original data. I have archived and examined texts, speeches, images and videos produced and disseminated by the Islamic State's ideologues and its media apparatus between 2003 and 2019, many of which have not been subject to a systematic qualitative or interpretive inquiry before.¹⁵ I understand these media primarily as manifestations of the ways in which the Islamic State's ideologues perceive, recognise and present reality. From among these, I have selected eighty-nine media files and have used a hermeneutical approach¹⁶ to reconstruct and probe the ways in which the Islamic State's ideologues create and use categories of social identity as a significant element of their self-representation and self-interpretation under specific sociohistorical conditions.

Based on this original data, I will show that like many other sociopolitical actors in Syria and Iraq, the Islamic State's ideologues have availed themselves of categories of social identity such as 'Muslim', 'Sunni', 'Arab', 'Shii', 'Iraqi' and 'Syrian' primarily as tools of communicative and cognitive structuring. Such categories are resources that people can use to make sense of reality. They provide shortcuts to potentially complex systems of beliefs, normative appeals, practices and orientations, as they help people understand who they are, how they are related to others and how they should behave in certain situations. The relationship of these ontological resources to one's sense of self, however, is volatile, ambiguous and highly variegated, determined, among other things, by the individual's horizon(s) of experience in their social environment.

I argue that entrepreneurs of identity use a broad variety of measures to create, coordinate and control a shared sense of 'we-ness' to try and regulate the relation of people's sense of self to specific categories of social identity. The symbolic repertoire created and used by the Islamic State's ideologues is a vivid example, and I will demonstrate how concepts from Islamic intellectual history, social practices and certain forms of cultural production are appropriated, reinterpreted and deployed to concatenate categories of social identity with the Islamic State's ideological framework. Moreover, this symbolic repertoire helps manifesting an 'Islamic State identity' through social action, thus providing the bedrock for the Islamic State's intragroup cohesion and the social solidarity of its leadership and ideologues, bureaucrats, fighters, supporters and potential associates.

To examine these linkages and still widely overlooked components of the group's successful establishment and expansion, both on the ground and on the internet, I explore how the ideologues of the Islamic State conceptualise the 'caliphate upon the prophetic way' (*khilāfa 'alā minhāj al-nubūwa*). Set against

modes of organising governance and society such as parliamentarism, democracy and secularity, the Islamic State's ideologues present the revival of the caliphate as a social order that promises existential security, to fulfil expectations of salvation, provide recognition and reconcile its audience's individual claims, goals, desires and future prospects with those of the collective – that is, the united Muslim umma across traditional boundaries of descent, ethnicity and rival schools of law – under the group's guidance and control. They encourage their adherents and potential followers to embrace the caliphate as the righteous social order, asserting a set of norms, values and beliefs whose implementation will help revitalise feelings of ontological security, honour, pride and dignity, which are, in fact, pivotal preconditions for attaining a positive and rewarding social identity. In this sense, the Islamic State's conceptualisation of the caliphate offers to fulfil the 'basic psychological needs of forming a meaningful worldview that provides a coherent and organized picture in times of stress, threat and deprivation' (Halperin 2014: 283), thus offering further incentives for strong intragroup cohesion.

I argue that this concept and its appropriation and reinterpretation form the basis for the Islamic State's deliberations on how 'genuine' Islamic rule and society ought to be structured, lived and experienced. This includes elaborations on the figure of the caliph and his office, on the institutions among which the *shūrā* enables and secures his rule and on the establishment of a social contract (*'ahd*) between rulers and ruled that is stipulated by divine ordinances. In my discussion of these elements, I will focus on the concepts mentioned, which I believe are fundamental, and thus will largely leave out ideas such as *wilāya* or the specific institutional design of the Islamic State. The focus on the above-mentioned ideas derives ultimately from the primary sources in which the Islamic State's ideologues draft a sometimes very detailed and elaborate configuration of these concepts. This configuration, I argue, determines their ability to offer plausible, comprehensible and meaningful appraisals of social and political events and facts, and to justify a claim to authority and various resources..

These ideologues' conceptualisation of the 'caliphate upon the prophetic way', however, does not merely help to clothe and justify claims to political power. I argue that their conceptual work has been a precondition for making the sacralised epistemic and ontological framework that is the caliphate socially tangible in the everyday reality of the people in Iraq and Syria. To continually reassert this framework, the ideologues demanded that people publicly perform an oath of allegiance to the caliph (*bay'a*), a practice appropriated from Prophetic tradition. More importantly, though, the Islamic State's ideologues appropriated and developed a set of social practices intended to manifest this sacralised framework through profound transformations of the social fabric and through shaping people's behaviour, thus furthering the social revolution the ideologues seek to incite. Based on the rather abstract Qur'anic dictum 'to command good and forbid wrong' (*al-amr bi-l-ma'rūf wa-l-nahī 'an al-munkar*), they initiated admin-

istrative and bureaucratic structures such as the *ḥisba*, whose members oversee the regulation of governance and society, enforce a strict code of conduct, seek to further the pervasion of people's minds and day-to-day practices with the Islamic State's ideology, and facilitate the intellectual rejection and material obliteration of any form of opposition to the Islamic State's claim to power and its vision of a 'genuine' Muslim society. With regard to this dimension of the identity politics of the Islamic State, I also focus on a selection of social practices and leave others – such as corporal punishments or school education in the Islamic State's territories – largely untouched.

Both concepts and social practices are reflected in a wide array of forms of cultural production, such as poetry, a cappella chants (*anāshīd*) and various forms of new media. The appropriation, creation and dissemination of still and moving images plays an important role in this regard, as it allows entrepreneurs of identity to appeal to various audiences across boundaries of culture and language, and helps the Islamic State distribute its messages in an emotionally effective way. This symbolic repertoire serves as an instrument connecting the Islamic State's ideas, norms and beliefs to their potential constituencies' lifeworlds, horizons of experience, historical memories, desires and future visions. As such, it helps to define and shape the meaning, characteristics and boundaries of a 'genuine' Sunni identity and a sense of 'true' Muslimness that are to be put into effect in a specific time and place. In addition to this, I argue that the iterative performance and enactment of this symbolic repertoire, both on the ground and in the virtual realm, also lends potential stability to the Islamic State's vision of governance and society, as it allows this vision to structure cognitions, shape appraisals of sociopolitical events and facts, accentuate particular emotions and, to some degree, shape collective behaviour in the long term, even if the Islamic State as such ceases to exist.

Outline of the Book

The extent to which the Islamic State's potential constituencies respond to these offers and claims in a favourable way is mainly contingent upon (and also reflects) the sociopolitical and psycho-emotional context. In Chapter 1, I will delineate this context and provide an overview of the ways in which the regimes of Saddam Husayn in Iraq and Hafez al-Asad and his son Bashar in Syria have facilitated a gradual 'sectarianisation' of the political landscape and the wider social fabric. Their rhetoric and policies increased the relevance of supranational collective identities and furthered the alienation of social groups from both the state and each other, while also affecting people's day-to-day orientations within networks of family, kin, tribe and sect. Whole collectives were played off against each other, and tendencies towards in-group favouritism and out-group animosity not only simmered, but were occasionally aroused by state and non-state actors. This

sociopolitical context provided fruitful ground for the Islamic State's ideologues, who hoped to achieve favourable responses to their offers.

The Islamic State emerged in a conflict situation that has shaped how its ideologues, bureaucrats and fighters understand themselves, their potential followers and their opponents. Moreover, this background determines the way in which the Islamic State articulates its claims towards both its adherents and its adversaries. As I will demonstrate in the course of this book, the movement and its predecessors capitalised on the 'vulnerability' of Sunni Arab Iraqi identity and symbols, making it easier for them to alter both significantly in a way that bolstered their own ideological framework. They sought to fashion the functional purpose of Sunni identity, drawing upon the perceived misery of Sunni Arabs in Syria, Iraq and elsewhere and promising to resolve their sense of existential and ontological crisis. For their followers, the offer made by the Islamic State's entrepreneurs of identity may seem to fit their social experience and thus facilitate the implementation of group norms. Employing this offer as an instrument of cognitive structuring can help to establish intragroup coherence through a sense of moral imperative to act against those who transgress the proposed norms. It can thus be conceived as 'perhaps the major strategy [of] entrepreneurs of identity' (Reicher 2004: 937).

Chapter 2 focuses on the concepts appropriated from Islamic intellectual history and reinterpreted by the Islamic State's ideologues in order to create their vision of governance and society. I will show that these ideologues have conceptualised the 'caliphate upon the prophetic way' (khilāfa 'alā minhāj al-nubūwa) as a distinct mode of sociopolitical organisation that they understand as being based on and defining the categories of Sunni Muslims and Sunni Arabs, which helps them to embrace 'all those they seek to mobilize, whose values and priorities are realized in their proposals and of which they themselves are representative' (Reicher, Haslam and Hopkins 2005: 557). In their view, the caliphate, as a governing body and a rigorously structured mode of organising all spheres of society, regulates both the worldly and spiritual affairs of its subjects. Guaranteeing their existential security but also fulfilling their expectations of salvation, it is an order that is sanctioned by divine ordinances and thus cannot be compromised.

The Islamic State's ideologues argue that, for a number of economic, social and political reasons, most Sunni Muslims fail to commit themselves to this 'righteous' path; hence, they suffer the most from spiritual, moral and social decline. To correct this, the ideologues promote the movement's interpretation of the caliphate as *the* solution to a supposed Sunni 'crisis of meaning' (Berger and Luckmann 1995). This state can only be resolved if Sunni Muslims recognise and support the Islamic State as the only legitimate force in an intractable conflict between 'believers' (mu'minūn) and all material and immaterial types of 'disbelief' (kufr), which are caused by social regulations and practices that obscure the divine ordinance and deviate from it. I will demonstrate some ways in which

the Islamic State's ideologues have sought to institutionalise divine ordinances through the establishment of bureaucratic and administrative structures. Institutions such as the *shūrā* council, the caliph's office and several ministries (*dawāwīn*, s. *diwān*) epitomise the Islamic State's all-encompassing vision of governance and society, creating and enforcing social practices such as the oath of allegiance (*bay'a*) to the caliphate and the call 'to command right and forbid wrong' (*al-amr bi-l-ma'rūf wa-l-nahy 'an al-munkar*), which are intended to secure implementation of this idea. As a result, I argue, the Islamic State and its predecessors conceptualise and articulate a particular form of Sunni identity – an 'Islamic State identity' – based on an all-embracing (re)imposition of religion over any other sphere of organisation of society.

In Chapter 3, I explore how the Islamic State's ideologues illuminate these concepts and social practices through still and moving images. Images are a distinct form of cultural production and aesthetic practice that helps entrepreneurs of identity to address various audiences across boundaries of language and culture, justify their cause, and produce and intensify particular emotional and attitudinal patterns among their targeted audiences. The Islamic State used the affective potential of both still and moving images to disseminate key narratives of its interpretation of reality, its own role within this world and the way in which it aspires to bring about fundamental social changes. These images, I argue, provide the Islamic State's audiences with a multisensory experience of a conflict between the agents of monotheism (*tawhīd*) and the forces of its antipodes, which are defined as inherently intractable. Visualisations of the way in which the Islamic State takes up the fight against these forces of disbelief (*kufr*), idolatry (*tāghūt*) and polytheism (*shirk*) can drag viewers into a particular lifeworld, help to take hold of their historical memory, structure their appraisals of and reactions to social and political events, facts and developments, and trigger intense emotional and physical responses. In doing so, they help to strengthen further the functional psychological infrastructure provided by the Islamic State's Manichaean ideological framework and its oversimplified assessment of the conflict, supporting social cohesion and intensifying identification with the movement and the social collective it claims to represent. At the same time, we can see that the way in which the Islamic State produces a particular iconography also includes an obvious momentum towards the destruction of visual representations. Iconography and iconoclasm are deeply interlinked. As I shall show, the destruction of ancient sites, the desecration of Christian churches and monasteries, the eradication of Sunni sites of religious practice, the obliteration of Shiite sites and the killings of Shiite clerics are all part of the Islamic State's attempt to establish a homogeneous, purified system of governance and society. I argue that these practices are to be understood in the first place as a form of *socioclasm*, because the Islamic State's all-encompassing concept of purification targets various spatial, material, ideational and intellectual manifestations of what it deems to be monotheism's

antipodes. For this cause and in the context explored in this book, the Islamic State's socioclasm, its reverberations and its consequences generated far-reaching changes to the social landscape of the territories seized, and were thus more important than, for instance, military operations at large, overseas attacks or even corporal punishments and their gruesome visualisation.

Notes

1. For the sake of brevity, I use the emic designation 'Islamic State' to denote the militant Jihadi-Salafi group that announced the establishment of an Islamic State (*dawla islāmīya*) in July 2014 CE/Ramadan 1435 AH. The use of this designation in this book encompasses all stages of the group's organisational and denominational evolution since 2003, when *al-Tawhīd wa 'l-Jihād* (Monotheism and Jihad) emerged as one of many small Sunni militias who fought the multinational occupation in Iraq. Announcing its alignment with *al-Qā'ida* in October 2004, the group henceforth operated as *Qā'idat al-jihād fi-bilād al-rāfidayn* (*al-Qā'ida* in the Land of the Two Rivers). Allying with several other Jihadi-Salafi militant groups in October 2006 to form the *ḥilf al-muṭayyabīn* (Alliance of the Scented), the group only a few days later announced the establishment of an 'Islamic State of Iraq' (*dawlat al-'Irāq al-islāmīya*). Two years after the Syrian uprising had turned into a violent civil conflict, the group had evolved into a powerful and socially significant movement, announcing its expansion into Syria and declaring the establishment of an 'Islamic State in Iraq and greater Syria' (*al-dawla al-islāmīya fi 'l-'Irāq wa 'l-Shām*) in late summer 2013. Finally, in June 2014, the movement's spokesperson announced the establishment of the Islamic State (*al-dawla al-islāmīya*). This denomination is still upheld, although the group's quasi-state structures have ceased to exist.
2. Most notably, sociologist Barbara Ballis Lal (1997) and social psychologist Stephen Reicher (2004) have advanced the notion of entrepreneurs of identity. See also Reicher et al. (2001); Reicher, Haslam and Hopkins (2005); Haslam and Reicher (2007); and Reicher and Haslam (2017).
3. Other notable studies include Brass (2003); Leong (2015); and Matthiesen (2015).
4. See Gerges (2016); Bastug and Guler (2018); Matveeva and Giustozzi (2018); Weiss and Hassan (2015); Helfont and Brill (2016b); and Barfi (2016).
5. See Johnston et al. (2016); Clarke et al. (2017); Robinson et al. (2017); Revkin (2020); Bauer (2016); Caris and Reynolds (2014); and a number of articles and blog posts by Aymenn al-Tamimi.
6. See Revkin (2016b); Günther and Kaden (2016); Lia (2017); and Friis (2017). Basil (2019) is among the few who offer a perspective on the entanglement of Western scholarship with the ways in which Jihadi-Salafi groups and their violence are exceptionalised. See also Gruber (2019b) and Ibrahim (2019).
7. See Krona and Pennington (2019); Lakomy (2019); Winkler and Pieslak (2018); Kraidy (2017a, 2017b); Rocca (2017); Monaci (2017); Calchi-Novati (2017); Ingram (2016); Macnair and Frank (2017); Ramsay (2015); and Lohlker (2011, 2013, 2019).
8. See Bean and Edgar (2017); Kraidy (2018); and al-Rawi (2016).
9. See Viano (2018); Lemos de Carvalho (2018); Winkler, El Damanhoury and Lemieux (2018); Amarasingam and Dawson (2018); Dawson and Amarasingam (2017); van San (2018); Koshkin, Zhidkikh and Novikov (2018); Speckhard and Yayla (2016); Romero (2016); Kaltenthaler, Silverman and Dagher (2018); Olidort (2016); Al Aqeedi (2016); and Berman et al. (2009).

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10. See Carpenter (2014); Michlig et al. (2019); Nilsson (2016, 2018); Saramifar (2019); Haid (2017); International Crisis Group (2016); Aubrey et al. (2016); Al Aqeedi (2015); and Berman, Shapiro and Felner (2011).
11. See Helfont and Helfont (2018); Yacoubian (2017); Cordesman (2018); and Human Rights Watch (2016).
12. See Long and Wilner (2014) and Perry and Long (2016).
13. See Boutz, Benninger and Lancaster (2018); Maher and Bissoondath (2019); Nanninga (2018); and Wagemakers (2015).
14. See Chouliaraki and Kissas (2018); Gatt (2020); Lohlker (2016); Malešević (2010: 237–74); Tripp (2018); Saramifar (2019); and Roy (2017).
15. Notable quantitative analyses of the Islamic State’s media work are Nanninga (2019); Winter (2018); Wignell et al. (2018); Berger and Morgan (2015); El Damanhoury (2017); and Lahoud and Pieslak (2018). Judith Tinnes’s *Counting Lives Lost* project (<https://twitter.com/countinglivespt>) also employs quantitative methods.
16. For elaborations on this methodology, see for example Knoblauch et al. (2013).