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RESEARCH ARTICLE

Statebuilding beyond the West: Exploring Islamic State's strategic narrative of governance and statebuilding

Raquel da Silva[1] (iD), Matthew Bamber-Zryd[2] (iD) and Nicolas Lemay-Hébert[3]

[1]Instituto Universitário de Lisboa (ISCTE-IUL), Centro de Estudos Internacionais, Lisboa, Portugal; [2]Graduate Institute of International and Development Studies, Geneva, Switzerland and [3]International Relations Department, Coral Bell School of Asia Pacific Affairs, Australian National University, Canberra, Australia
Corresponding author. Email: matthew.bamber@graduateinstitute.ch

Abstract
Strategic narratives are employed by political actors as tools to pursue their goals, constructing a shared meaning of the past, present, and future in order to shape behaviour. Building on discourse analysis of the magazine *Dabiq* and from in-depth, semi-structured interviews conducted between 2018 and 2019 with IS civilian employees and civilians living in IS-controlled territory, we analyse how IS organised its strategic narrative of governance and statebuilding around three main themes considered as central in the statebuilding literature – the provision of security, the provision of basic services, and social cohesion – and how such a strategic narrative was received by citizens living in IS-controlled territory. We argue that the study of strategic narratives of governance and statebuilding casts light on the factors leading to the success or demise of emergent statebuilding efforts, equally demonstrating how IS's project is quite conventional when compared to other mainstream statebuilding narratives.

Introduction

New debates have emerged regarding the different forms of statehood, carried by a new wave of exciting research on performativity and the state, as well as strategic narratives of statebuilding. Analysing how actors 'perform statehood' allows us to shed new light on different statebuilding models, especially beyond the Western model. One recent specific statebuilding project that attracted lots of attention is that of the Islamic State (IS), straddling the borders between Iraq and Syria, which declared the establishment of a caliphate on the territory under its control in June 2014. This article makes a unique contribution to the literature on IS's statebuilding by articulating a strategic narrative approach to statebuilding, focusing on how actors perform statehood in IS-controlled territory and how this narrative is received by residents of this territory. Despite a growing interest in the counterterrorism literature on strategic narratives, we agree with Cristina Archetti that 'surprisingly little effort has gone into understanding the nature of narratives' in this context.[1] The concept of strategic narrative is understood here as 'a story with a political purpose' – often a story that can be crystallised into a single word or phrase. Such stories provide an organising

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[1]Cristina Archetti, 'Narrative wars', in Alister Miskimmon, Ben O'Loughlin, and Laura Roselle (eds), *Forging the World* (Ann Arbor, MI: Michigan University Press, 2018), pp. 218–45 (p. 219).

framework for collective action, defining a community's identity, values, and goals, as well as the stakes of its struggles;[2] they shape the actors' world and constrain behaviour. Through strategic narratives political actors construct a shared meaning of the past, present, and future in order to shape behaviour.[3] In this article, we look at two specific phases of the communicative process of strategic narratives: their projection as well as their reception.[4]

Analysing IS's strategic narrative of statebuilding enables us to shed new light on the nature of the governance project in Iraq and Syria. Some practitioners have made a point of not calling it a state – with the United Nations (UN) Secretary-General even using the convoluted term 'Un-Islamic Non-State' instead.[5] Although the term Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham (ISIS or ISIL) is commonly used, we agree with Daniel Byman that the best term to use is indeed 'Islamic State'.[6] It is, after all, the term that the organisation used when gaining global prominence in 2014, changing its name from ISIS to Islamic State (*ad-Dawlah al-Islāmiyah*).[7] As this article engages with IS's narrative of statebuilding, we refer to IS without engaging in the normative discussion as to whether IS was truly representative of Islamic values.[8] At the same time, strategic narratives are a function of its consistency with events and are embedded in its practices of governance.[9] When IS triumphed, its statebuilding narrative was reinforced. When IS lost most of its territory over 2017–18, its narrative lost traction.

Some authors have looked at the 'external' narrative of IS statebuilding,[10] its religious or non-religious roots,[11] or the sheer brutality of its rule,[12] however, only a few have inquired into the internal governance narrative of IS. Most of the relevant studies on this topic have primarily emerged within the field of rebel governance. For instance, recent studies using a combination of interviews and surveys have focused on different aspects of IS's governance, most notably its financial policies and institutions,[13] tribal relations,[14] civilian relations,[15] or patterns of sexual violence.[16] Others have focused on changes in IS's governance administration using documents released by IS's

[2]Matthew Levinger and Laura Roselle, 'Narrating global order and disorder', *Politics and Governance*, 5:3 (2017), pp. 94–8 (p. 94).

[3]Alister Miskimmon, Ben O'Loughlin, and Laura Roselle, *Strategic Narratives* (Abingdon, UK: Routledge, 2013), p. 2.

[4]Alister Miskimmon, Ben O'Loughlin, and Laura Roselle, 'Introduction', in Miskimmon, O'Loughlin, and Roselle (eds), *Forging the World*, pp. 1–22 (p. 9).

[5]United Nations Secretary-General, 'Secretary's Remarks to Security Council High-Level Summit on Foreign Terrorist Fighters' (24 September 2014), available at: {https://www.un.org/sg/en/content/sg/statement/2014-09-24/secretary-generals-remarks-security-council-high-level-summit} accessed 28 October 2020.

[6]Daniel Byman, 'Understanding the Islamic State: A review essay', *International Security*, 40:4 (2016), pp. 127–65 (p. 128).

[7]All Arabic words have been transliterated in the text using the Library of Congress system, unless there is a commonly accepted version of an Arabic word (e.g., Aleppo rather than *Ḥalab*).

[8]Shadi Hamid and Will McCants, 'John Kerry won't call the Islamic State by its name anymore', *Washington Post* (29 December 2014).

[9]Robin Brown, 'Public diplomacy, networks, and the limits of strategic narratives', in Miskimmon, O'Loughlin, and Roselle (eds), *Forging the World*, pp. 164–89 (pp. 182–3).

[10]See, for instance, Stephen M. Walt, 'ISIS as revolutionary state', *Foreign Affairs*, 94:6 (2015), pp. 42—51.

[11]Graeme Wood, 'What ISIS really wants', *The Atlantic* (March 2015).

[12]One could say that a regime's cruelty is an intrinsic part of its statebuilding agenda; after all, Niccolò Machiavelli's advice to the Prince included 'a few exemplary executions'. However, IS's social media presence suggests that executions happened more or less continually.

[13]Patrick B. Johnston et al., *Return and Expand?* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2019); Mara Redlich Revkin, 'What explains taxation by resource-rich rebels?', *The Journal of Politics*, 82:2 (2020), pp. 757–76.

[14]Craig Whiteside and Anas Elallame, 'Accidental ethnographers', *Small Wars & Insurgencies*, 31:2 (2020), pp. 219–40; Rudayna Al-Baalbaky and Ahmad Mhidi, *Tribes and The Rule of the 'Islamic State'* (Beirut: Issam Fares Institute for Public Policy and International Affairs, 2018).

[15]Zachariah Mampilly and Megan A. Stewart, 'A typology of rebel political institutional arrangements', *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, online first (2020); Mara Redlich Revkin and Ariel I. Ahram, 'Perspectives on the rebel social contract', *World Development*, 132 (2020), pp. 1–9.

[16]Mara Redlich Revkin and Elisabeth Jean Wood, 'The Islamic State's pattern of sexual violence: Ideology and institutions, policies and practices', *Journal of Global Security Studies*, 6:2 (2021).

federal and provincial governing institutions.[17] This article builds on this scholarship and makes a unique contribution through a strategic narrative approach of IS's statebuilding project, specifically comparing its projection with an analysis of the *Dabiq* magazine and with interviews conducted on the ground.

Furthermore, although some scholars have attempted to evaluate IS's governance in terms of its perception in providing service and security provision,[18] most of the existing literature on civilian's perception of IS focuses on the two IS 'capitals': Mosul and Raqqa.[19] This can be explained by several factors. Mosul and Raqqa were the predominant focus of IS's online statebuilding propaganda efforts, and as such the research follows the practice, and these two areas, especially Mosul, have been relatively easier for researchers to access and undertake surveys of the civilian population – the two largest surveys of civilians living in IS-occupied territory took place in Mosul.[20] However, these two 'capitals' do not reflect the significant variation in the perception of civilians to IS's statebuilding narratives. This article is based on analysis of interviews conducted with persons from the 11 Iraqi and Syrian *wilyāt* (provinces) that IS had sole or contested control over for a period of six months or longer, between 2014 and 2018.[21] These interviews, however, reflect the opinion of these persons, living in a particular place and time of IS rule; there is significant differences in the experiences of persons living under IS that is impossible to capture systematically in these interviews alone.

With these original contributions in mind, this article answers the following research question: how does IS present its strategic narrative of governance and statebuilding, and how has it been received by citizens living in areas under IS control? As such, this article links two different levels of statebuilding narratives: the projection of the strategic narrative of statebuilding as articulated by IS and the reception of this narrative by citizens living in IS. The strategic narrative in IS-controlled territory as projected through the *Dabiq* magazine had multiple audiences (e.g., English-speaking, second-generation Muslims or converts, and Western policymakers),[22] but it mostly focused on showcasing what a 'complete society for Muslims' looks like.[23] Contrasting the strategic narrative of statebuilding in IS-controlled territory with the individual narratives of citizens who have experienced first-hand 'statebuilding' on the ground enables us to shed new light on the nature of the political project and its ramifications, as well as to analyse how different and unique IS's statebuilding project might be compared to other established and recognised statebuilding projects. Most assume that the narrative statebuilding deployed by IS would contrast with coming statebuilding projects – either showing similarities to other revolutionary statebuilding projects,[24] or being altogether different from other contemporary statebuilding projects by the sheer atrocity of the tactics deployed. However, we agree with Shadi Hamid when he says that 'those wishing to focus almost entirely on the Islamic State's awfulness – to the exclusion of what made it successful – are falling

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[17]Aymenn Al-Tamimi, 'The evolution in Islamic State administration', *Perspectives on Terrorism*, 9:4 (2015), pp. 117–29; Aymenn Al-Tamimi, 'A caliphate under strain', *CTC Sentinel*, 9:4 (2016), pp. 1–8.

[18]Rana Khalaf, 'Beyond arms and beards', in Timothy Poirson and Robert L. Oprisko (eds), *Caliphates and Islamic Global Politics* (Bristol, UK: E-International Relations, 2014), pp. 57–67.

[19]Mara Redlich Revkin, 'Competitive governance and displacement decisions under rebel governance', *Journal of Conflict Resolution* (online first) (2020); Nate Rosenblatt and David Kilcullen, *How Raqqa Became the Capital of ISIS* (Washington, DC: New America, 2019).

[20]Isak Svensson, Jonathan Hall, Dino Krause, and Eric Skoog, 'How ordinary Iraqis resisted the Islamic State', *Washington Post* (22 March 2019); Revkin, 'Competitive governance and displacement decisions under rebel governance'.

[21]IS divided its state into twenty Iraqi and Syrian provinces between 2014 and 2018. However, IS had sole or contested control over for at least six months in only 11 provinces: al-Furat, al-Khayr, Anbar, Raqqa, Ninevah, al-Jazirah, Dijlah, Barakah, Aleppo, Salahuddin, and Fallujah.

[22]Brandon Colas, 'What does *Dabiq* do?', *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism*, 40:3 (2017), pp. 173—90.

[23]Ian R. Pelletier, Lief Lundmark, Rachel Gardner, Gina Scott Ligon, and Ramazan Kilinc, 'Why ISIS's message resonates', *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism*, 39:19 (2016), pp. 871—99.

[24]Walt, 'ISIS as revolutionary state'.

into an analytical trap.'[25] There is something to be gained from studying the strategic narratives of statebuilding deployed by IS and its relative effectiveness – from a local population standpoint – in certain aspects of governing.

We begin by situating this study within the relevant literature regarding strategic narratives of statebuilding. We contend that most statebuilding claims fall within three broad clusters of practice: (1) security provision; (2) provision of basic services; and (3) social cohesion. Rather than treating these categories as simple benchmarks against which to assess statebuilding projects, we argue that these clusters help 'create a story' in a strategic narrative way, making sense of what statebuilding actors do or what they should be doing. After presenting our data, methods, and methodological choices, we specifically analyse IS's strategic narrative of statebuilding through a combined analysis of the *Dabiq* magazine – projection of the strategic narrative – and the reception of the strategic narrative by citizens living under IS's rule. A few elements emerge from our analysis. Interestingly, the project is quite conventional when compared to other mainstream statebuilding narratives. Beyond the hyper-violent and religious foundations of the project, the actual governance claims in the statebuilding project as put forth by IS's leadership are surprisingly in line with the cannons of statebuilding literature. There is a clear willingness by IS to appear to meet the citizens' expectations of the state, both in terms of the provision of security and public services, as well as a specific understanding of societal cohesion, although with a clearly Schmittian understanding of the political at play. These claims are also historically and temporally grounded as discussed above – linked to the relative success (and subsequent failure) of the military campaigns as well as the shortfalls of the competing statebuilding projects in Baghdad and Damascus. Through the data collected through interviews, we see citizens not as passive voices but as powerful, critical actors of the statebuilding process, connecting with some of the governance claims made by IS while reserving their judgment on the more sensitive issues (e.g., sectarianism). Hence, through our analysis, we put forward a more complex and nuanced understanding of IS's governance and statebuilding project and, through this case study, we offer a wider and innovative take on the strategic narratives of statebuilding.

Strategic narratives of statebuilding

Statebuilding has long been represented as a policy outcome – a list of state functions to be achieved in order to have the right to be recognised as a normal state in international relations – or as a subcategory of liberal interventionism,[26] or security governance interventions,[27] hence understood as an external intervention 'performed by, or at least led by, external actors in a top-down manner'.[28] More broadly speaking, state formation has been heuristically distinguished from statebuilding in the IR literature.[29] These postulates that structure the debates on statebuilding lead in turn to two separate sets of issues. First, by focusing on state functions, the existing statebuilding literature that emerges from security studies has largely failed to understand the contested and political nature of the concept. Second, focusing on international interventions obscures how statebuilding takes place on an everyday level and is a by-product of both discourse and practice at the international and local levels. Following the work of Charles Tilly,[30] for instance, statebuilding has convincingly

[25]Shadi Hamid, 'What America Never Understood about ISIS', Brookings Institution (1 November 2019).

[26]Roland Paris, 'Peacebuilding and the limits of liberal internationalism', *International Security*, 22:2 (1997), pp. 54–89; Michael Barnett, 'Building a Republican peace', *International Security*, 30:4 (2006), pp. 87–112.

[27]David Chandler, 'New narratives of international security governance', *Global Crime*, 17:3–4 (2016), pp. 264–80.

[28]Andrea Kathryn Talentino, 'The two faces of nation-building', *Cambridge Review of International Affairs*, 17:3 (2004), pp. 557–75 (p. 559).

[29]Oliver Richmond, *Failed Statebuilding: Intervention, the State, and the Dynamics of Peace Formation* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2014).

[30]Charles Tilly, *Coercion, Capital, and European States*, *AD 990–1990* (Cambridge, UK: Blackwell, 1990)

been understood as *longue durée* state formation,[31] and the sociological state formation literature tends to be obscured by the obsession in the statebuilding literature about military interventions.

If statebuilding follows practice – as it is constituted through the actual practice of officials acting on behalf of the state apparatus – we argue here that strategic narratives of statebuilding link internal order with external relations, acting as a 'story with meaning, characters, and a plotline'.[32] In this sense, strategic narratives are not simply programmatic or prescriptive; they represent a worldview. Understanding statebuilding through a strategic narrative approach enables us to link actual practice with the way actors understand this practice, bringing to light how actors conceptualise the state in which they operate, and which aspect of statebuilding they tend to prioritise over other aspects. At the same time, the reception of strategic narratives is not entirely controlled by actors producing them, with citizens approving, resisting and ignoring specific facets of the narratives.

Three clusters of practices are generally highlighted in the statebuilding literature: security provision, provision of basic services, and social cohesion. The first two clusters, inspired in major part by Neo-Weberian scholarship,[33] have traditionally revolved around the delivery of public goods. However, in parallel, other scholars have pointed out the crucial importance of societal cohesion and legitimacy in statebuilding processes.[34] These three clusters of practices help understand how governance practices are an integral part of the projection of the narrative of statebuilding on the international scene. We discuss each of these three aspects of statebuilding in turn.

First, security provision appears as a crucial feature of all statebuilding analyses. Based on the classic Weberian understanding of the state 'as a human community that successfully claims the monopoly of the legitimate use of physical force within a given territory',[35] the state's ability to provide security is the usual benchmark according to which each state can be judged. As such, Martin Doornbos, Susan Woodward, and Silvia Roque define failing states as 'states incapable to fulfil the basic tasks of providing security for their populace'.[36] Traditionally, policymakers have also highlighted this aspect, with the former UN Secretary-General, Boutros Boutros-Ghali, defining state collapse as 'the collapse of state institutions, especially the police and judiciary, with resulting paralysis of governance, a breakdown of law and order, and general banditry and chaos.'[37]

Second, if the provision of security stands out in the literature as a particularly crucial element of statebuilding, it is also more broadly speaking only one of the functions that the state is perceived to have to deliver, among other service provisions. Hence, the classical definition of the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) highlights that 'states are fragile when state structures lack political will and/or capacity to provide the basic functions needed for poverty reduction, development and to safeguard the security and human rights of their

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[31]Berit Bliesemann de Guevara, 'Introduction', in by Berit Bliesemann de Guevara (ed.), *Statebuilding and State-Formation* (Abingdon, UK: Routledge 2013), pp. 1–13; John L. Brooke and Julia C. Strauss, 'Introduction', in by John L. Brooke, Julia C. Strauss and Greg Anderson (eds), *State Formations* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2018), pp. 1–21; Lars Bo Kaspersen, Jeppe Strandsbjerg, and Benno Teschke, 'Introduction', in Lars Bo Kaspersen and Jeppe Strandsbjerg (eds), *Does War Make States?* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2017), pp. 1–22; Paul Kenny, 'The origins of patronage politics', *British Journal of Political Science*, 45:1 (2013), pp. 141—71; Tuong Vu, 'Studying the state through state formation', *World Politics*, 62:1 (2010), pp. 148—75.

[32]Jelena Subotić, 'Narrative, ontological security, and foreign policy change', *Foreign Policy Analysis*, 12:4 (2016), pp. 610–27 (p. 610).

[33]Philipp Lottholz and Nicolas Lemay-Hébert, 'Re-reading Weber, re-conceptualizing state-building', *Cambridge Review of International Affairs*, 29:4 (2016), pp. 1467—85.

[34]Barry Buzan, *People, States and Fear* (New York, NY: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1991);

Rukmini Callimachi, 'A news agency with scoops directly from ISIS, and a veneer of objectivity', *New York Times* (14 January 2016); Kalevi Holsti, *The State, War, and the State of War* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1996).

[35]Max Weber, 'Politics as a vocation', in Hans Gerth and C. Wright Mills (eds), *From Max Weber* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 1948), pp. 77–128 (p. 78).

[36]Martin Doornbos, Susan Woodward, and Silvia Roque, *Failing States of Failed States?* (Madrid: FRIDE, 2006), p. 2.

[37]Boutros Boutros-Ghali, 'Concluding Statement of the UN Congress on Public International Law', New York, NY, 13–17 March 1995.

populations.'[38] Besides security, other criteria are considered, all related to the capabilities of the state to secure its grip on society. Hence, 'the progress of state-building can be measured by the degree of development of certain instrumentalities whose purpose is to make the action of the state effective: bureaucracy, courts, military.'[39] Robert Rotberg is even more explicit, stating that 'nation-states exist to provide a decentralized method of delivering political (public) goods to persons living within designated parameters (borders).'[40] These public goods encompass the supply of security, but also go beyond to include medical and health care, schools and education, railways or harbours. Hence, most definitions of statebuilding include security provision and service provision by the state institutions.

Third, social cohesion tends to be highlighted by scholars broadly following a social legitimacy approach to the state and statebuilding. While accepting the institutional approach's focus on the security apparatus and state institutions, especially as a critical first step in statebuilding processes, the social legitimacy approach adds a layer of complexity by drawing attention to the state's underlying legitimacy. For scholars who consciously or unconsciously adopt this approach, the strengths of the state (and, conversely, its weaknesses) must be defined in terms of 'the capacity of state to command loyalty', that is, 'the right to rule'.[41] If a state cannot exist without a physical foundation, as those focusing on state institutions emphasise, the reverse is also true: 'without a widespread and quite deeply rooted idea of the state among the population, the state institutions themselves have difficulty functioning and surviving.'[42] Rejoining the Durkheimian sociological tradition, this approach thus emphasises the logics of social integration and solidarity as well as the logics of *anomie*,[43] not only on the neo-Weberian logics of state capacity.

Based on the previous discussion, one can see how statebuilding has been mostly understood either as state functions through a state capability lens, or conversely as state legitimacy through a societal cohesion lens. However, moving beyond statebuilding as a toolbox or benchmarks, we argue that statebuilding can alternatively be understood as a disputed political project through competing strategic narratives. This enables us to highlight how actors make sense of policies (governance practices) and how they communicate to local audiences and to the outside world. In this sense, it is not so much about what the institutions of the state *do*, but how actors *make sense of what they do*, and to a certain extent *of what they should be doing*. Following this logic, there is not only one model of statebuilding (or model state), but competing ones, put forth in different time periods by different actors with divergent aims. As such, expectations about what states do and should be doing inform international interventions and how they (re)construct state institutions, but also how actors – national and international – make sense of state formation processes.

Understanding statebuilding through its multiple framings broadly anchors this project in the constructivist international relations discussion, starting from the premise that 'activities are political when members of a social unit construe those activities to be the most important ones engaging their attention.'[44] It is particularly interesting to see how IS has used the traditional categories of statebuilding explored above to frame its governance of the region, thus engaging in its own way with the statebuilding corpus. Hence, this shows how actors intentionally try to connect new normative ideas to established ideas when they construct persuasive messages.[45]

[38]OECD, *Principles for Good International Engagement in Fragile States and Situations* (Paris: OECD, 2007), para. 3.

[39]Joel Migdal, *Strong Societies and Weak States* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1998), p. 35.

[40]Robert Rotberg, 'The failure and collapse of nation-states', in Robert Rotberg (ed.), *When States Fail* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2004), pp. 1–49 (p. 2).

[41]Holsti, *The State, War, and the State of War*, p. 82.

[42]Buzan, *People, States and Fear*, p. 64.

[43]Émile Durkheim, *Suicide* (New York, NY: Simon and Schuster, 1997), p. 382.

[44]Nicholas Onuf, *World of Our Making: Rules and Rule in Social Theory and International Relations* (Abingdon, UK: Routledge, 1989), p. 2.

[45]Martha Finnemore and Kathryn Sikkink, 'International norm dynamics and political change', *International Organization*, 52:4 (1998), pp. 887–917 (pp. 906–07).

Data and methods

This article draws on empirical insights from the analysis of IS's now defunct online magazine *Dabiq* and from in-depth, semi-structured interviews conducted between 2018 and 2019 with 34 IS civilian employees and 69 ordinary civilians living in IS-controlled territory. This choice of method allowed us to access IS's strategic narratives of statebuilding projected through *Dabiq*, as well as how such narratives were received on the ground.

IS's narratives were spread through both online and offline standardised media, which was essential in IS's statebuilding project to create a 'collective identity' and 'imagined communities' among individuals who would not, in most cases, ever meet.[46] According to Harleen Gambhir through 'the analysis of IS's own propaganda, the holistic state-building project of the Islamic State becomes visible'.[47] Such media efforts were centrally organised by a media division that ran several media production centres (e.g., *Al-Hayat, Al-Furqan*, and *Al-Ethar*), with locally run media departments within each province controlled by IS. The media division owned a news agency that operated an Android app and the *Al-Bayan* radio station, and which published the newspaper *Al-Nabaa* (in Arabic), and the monthly *Dabiq* magazine (in Arabic, English, Turkish, French, and German).[48] In terms of social media, IS had some centralised accounts on platforms such as Twitter, Instagram, and Telegraph, which vocalised standardised messages contributing to the creation of a unified brand,[49] and that have been examined in other studies.[50]

Dabiq has been considered the main media platform created by IS, having covered key areas and themes, which then inspired various online activities (e.g., videos and Twitter hashtags),[51] aimed at building IS's legitimacy for its statebuilding project, as well as encouraging Muslims to join them.[52] Preceded by three issues of *Islamic State News* (May to June 2014) and four issues of *Islamic State Report* (June 2014), the first of 14 issues of *Dabiq* was published in July 2014. The creation of the e-magazine seems to have been related to the positive comments received in relation to the earlier publications, which were dominated by photographic reports of battlefield victories. Each issue contained forty to eighty pages, was presented in a professional layout, and was populated by several images. From the ninth issue (May 2015) onward, there were references to internet videos produced by various IS provinces.

Our analysis of *Dabiq* occurred in two stages. The first was guided by a detailed and rigorous thematic network analysis of the magazine's first 13 issues conducted by Julian Droogan and Shane Peattie to identify the relevant articles that shed light on IS's statebuilding project.[53] The second constituted the thematic organisation of different articles under the statebuilding themes of the provision of security, the provision of basic services, and social cohesion. Each strategic narrative theme was not mutually exclusive because, at times, the same *Dabiq* article covered different themes. Consequently, articles were always treated as a whole, never sliced into pieces or separated from contextual information, preserving the complete sense of the different accounts.

[46] Ahmed Al-Rawi, 'Islamic State in Iraq and Syria's standardized media and jihadist nation-state building efforts', *Communication and the Public*, 4:3 (2019), pp. 224–38 (p. 225).

[47] Harleen Gambhir, *Dabiq* (Washington, DC: Institute for the Study of War, 2014), p. 1.

[48] See Gilad Shiloach, 'This New ISIS App Brings Terror Straight To Your Cell Phone', Vocativ (2015), available at: {http://www.vocativ.com/255768/this-new-isis-app-brings-terror-straight-to-your-cell-phone/} accessed 29 October 2020.

[49] Ahmed Al-Rawi and Jacob Groshek, 'Jihadist propaganda on social media', *International Journal of Cyber Warfare and Terrorism*, 8:4 (2018), pp. 1–15.

[50] J. M. Berger and Jonathan Morgan, *The ISIS Twitter Census* (Washington, DC: Brookings Project on US Relations With the Islamic World, 2015); Joseph A. Carter, Shiraz Maher, and Peter R. Neumann, *#Greenbirds* (London, UK: International Centre for the Study of Radicalization and Political Violence, 2014); Jytte Klausen, 'Tweeting the jihad', *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism*, 38:1 (2015), pp. 1—22.

[51] See Sara Monaci, 'Explaining the Islamic State's online media strategy', *International Journal of Communication*, 11 (2017), pp. 2842–60.

[52] Gambhir, *Dabiq*.

[53] Julian Droogan and Shane Peattie, 'Mapping the thematic landscape of *Dabiq* magazine', *Australian Journal of International Affairs*, 71:6 (2017), pp. 591—620.

Our analysis was also complemented by interviews, conducted in the context of a larger project examining the rebel governance and statebuilding activities of IS in its Iraqi and Syrian territories.[54] In total, 103 interviews were carried out in Iraq, Lebanon, and Turkey with two target groups: civilian IS employees working in IS's federal and provincial governing institutions, and ordinary civilians who lived in IS-held territory in Iraq and Syria without any employment relationship to IS. A further six interviews were conducted on Telegram, Signal, and WhatsApp with civilians still residing in southern Iraq and Syria, due to the security challenges in accessing these areas.[55]

The following section examines IS's strategic narratives of statebuilding put forward by *Dabiq* regarding three crucial areas identified previously – the provision of security, the provision of basic services, and social cohesion – presenting them in dialogue with the perceptions and experiences of Iraqi and Syrian civilians who lived and worked in IS-controlled territory.

IS's narratives of statebuilding

IS argued that it was indeed a state.[56] In the eighth issue of *Dabiq*, journalist and hostage John Cantlie wrote that IS should be viewed as a state, arguing:

> I am certainly no expert on such matters and my views are those of a layman, but generally one doesn't expect a mere 'organization' to lay siege to cities or have their own police force. You certainly don't expect a mere 'organization' to have tanks and artillery pieces, an army of soldiers' tens of thousands strong, and their own spy drones. And one certainly doesn't expect a mere 'organization' to have a mint with plans to produce their own currency, primary schools for the young, and a functioning court system. These, surely, are all hallmarks of (whisper it if you dare) a country.[57]

However, what aspects of statebuilding were emphasised in the practice and discourse of IS? How were they received by the citizens of this new state? One striking element that appears when analysing IS's strategic narrative of statebuilding is how conventional the project looks when compared with mainstream statebuilding literature. Despite the temptation to see IS as a political intruder in a rather well-curated field of statebuilding practice, we find a strong emphasis in their statebuilding strategic narrative on the three aspects of statebuilding most discussed and debated in the literature — security provision, provision of basic services, and societal cohesion.

Provision of security

Two factors seem to strongly contribute to the provision of security in *Dabiq*: the sheer presence of IS fighters – it was recounted that 'the establishment of the *wilāyah* [provinces] was accompanied by an initiative that bolstered the presence of the *mujahidin* [fighters] in the *wilāyah* in order to reinforce the region and strengthen the safety';[58] and the specific action of *al-Ḥisbah*,[59] IS's local morality police, responsible for 'commanding the good and forbidding the evil'.[60] In terms of civilians' perception of IS's ability to provide public security, we found that they differed according to the capability and quality of the governing institutions that IS established to enforce its security

[54]Matthew Bamber, '"Without us, there would be no Islamic State": The role of civilian employees in the caliphate', *CTC Sentinel*, 14:9 (2021), pp. 1–39; Matthew Bamber-Zryd, 'Cyclical jihadist governance: The Islamic State governance cycle in Iraq and Syria', *Small Wars & Insurgencies*, 33:8 (2022), pp. 1314–44.

[55]The interviewees came from a broad range of socioeconomic classes and from the 11 provinces under IS control. See online supplementary material for more detailed information.

[56]Colas, 'What does *Dabiq* do'.

[57]'Paradigm Shift', *Dabiq*, No. 8 (2015), pp. 64–7 (p. 65).

[58]'The Birth Of Two New Wilāyāt', *Dabiq*, No. 4 (2014), pp. 18–20 (p. 18).

[59]There is no direct translation for the role of *al-Ḥisbah* under IS. Countries such as Saudi Arabia and Sudan have agencies responsible for enforcing *al-Ḥisbah*, that is frequently translated as 'Morality Police' or 'Religious Police'.

[60]'Da'wah and Hisbah in the Islamic State', *Dabiq*, No. 3 (2014), pp. 16–17 (p. 17).

strategy and laws. Interviewees across Iraq and Syria mentioned three IS governing institutions that related to public security: *Shurṭah al-ʾIslāmiyyah* (Islamic Police), *al-Ḥisbah*, and *al-ʾAmniyīn* (Intelligence). The purviews of these institutions differed slightly across IS's provinces, although in general civilians mentioned that these institutions had the following responsibilities: *Shurṭah al-ʾIslāmiyyah* was in charge of minor transgressions, *al-Ḥisbah* was in charge of more major infractions, civil disobedience, and public order, while *al-ʾAmniyīn* investigated treason against IS and internal IS security issues. Civilians tended to mostly interact with *al-Hisbah*, as it ensured public compliance with IS's laws on behaviour, clothing, and guardianship. *al-Ḥisbah* had both male and female units and was composed of a mixture of local and foreign fighters. There were multiple branches of *al-Ḥisbah* in each city and civilians' perceptions of IS's public security frequently depended on the perceived quality and fairness of its local branch and individual members. Interviewees who had personal incidents with *al-Ḥisbah* that were perceived as unjust, often had a more negative view of IS's overall public security, in comparison with individuals who had neutral or positive encounters with *al-Ḥisbah*. This was typified in the response of a 42-year-old housewife from Dijlah province:

> IS were terrible, al-Ḥisbah terrorised us constantly and didn't keep us safe. My husband was whipped thirty times because skin was showing where my glove had ridden up. Why didn't they warn me instead of just arresting my husband and whipping him?

In the first seven issues of *Dabiq*, this way of providing security through severe punishment of any (perceived) criminal activity was crystal clear. IS executed robbers – 'Two highway robbers were executed in Al-Jazarah, east of Wilayat Ar-Raqqah, as punishment for hirabah (armed robbery)';[61] stoned adulterous women – 'The hadd[62] of stoning is carried out on a woman for committing adultery';[63] punished supporters of the Syrian regime – 'Hadd is carried out on 8 shabbīhah[64] apostates for supporting and colluding with the nusayrī[65] regime';[66] tackled drug trafficking – 'The Islamic Police apprehend a major drug trafficker in Wilāyat Homs, seizing a large quantity of drugs in the process';[67] carried out executions for homosexuality – 'This was demonstrated recently in Wilāyat ArRaqqah, where the Islamic State carried out the hadd on a man found guilty of engaging in sodomy. He was taken to the top of a building and thrown off';[68] and flogged individuals for possessing pornography – 'a man was recently flogged as a taʾzīr (disciplinary punishment) after he was found to be in possession of pornographic material.'[69] In addition, there is quite some coverage regarding the execution of 'shuʾaytāt traitors', who were clans that initially accepted IS rule but ended up ambushing 'Islamic State soldiers, and then tortured, amputated, and executed prisoners taken from the ambushes. All these crimes were carried out in opposition to the enforcement of the Sharīʾah.'[70] Similarly, a lot of attention was invested in explaining the decision to burn an enemy pilot alive on camera: 'This week, the Islamic State released a video depicting the execution of the Jordanian crusader pilot, Muʾādh Sāfī Yūsuf al-Kasāsibah. As displayed in the video, the Islamic State had resolved to burn him alive as retribution for his crimes against Islam and the Muslims, including his active involvement in crusader airstrikes against Muslim lands.'[71]

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[61]'Regime Targets Ar-Raqqah', *Dabiq*, No. 1 (2014), pp. 42–5 (p. 45).

[62]In Islamic jurisprudence hadd refers to the punishments for six crimes that are immutably fixed in the Quran and hadith.

[63]'Hadd of Stoning', *Dabiq*, No. 2 (2014), pp. 36–7 (p. 36).

[64]Derogative term for Alawite supporters of the Bashar al-Assad regime in Syria.

[65]Derogative term for the Assad regime in Syria.

[66]'Hadd for 8 Shabbihah', *Dabiq*, No. 2 (2014), p. 33.

[67]'121st Regiment Base Captured', *Dabiq*, No. 2 (2014), pp. 39–41 (p. 41).

[68]'Campling Down on Sexual Deviance', *Dabiq*, No. 7 (2014), pp. 42–3 (p. 43).

[69]Ibid.

[70]'The Punishment of Shuʾaytāt for Treachery', *Dabiq*, No. 3 (2014), pp. 12–14 (p. 13).

[71]'The Burning of the Murtad Pilot', *Dabiq*, No. 7 (2014), pp. 6–8 (p. 6).

Dabiq offered several religious explanations for IS's ways of delivering justice – 'It is the implementation of Allah's rulings and the adherence to His guidance, bi idhnillāh, that will protect the Muslims from treading the same rotten course that the West has chosen to pursue.'[72] It remarked that civilians living in IS-controlled territory were better off than before when it came to provision of security – 'For the first time in years, Muslims are living in security … The killer is killed. The adulterer is stoned.'[73] This was not only affirmed by IS members, but also by civilians like Bilal, living in Raqqa, who was quoted as saying: 'You can travel from Raqqa to Mosul, and no one will dare to stop you even if you carry $1 million.'[74] Among the Iraqi and Syrian residents interviewed, we found some who viewed IS favourably as a public security provider. They recognised that IS reduced the risk of kidnappings, shootings, theft, and violent criminal behaviour in its controlled territory. In many areas, residents equally felt a significant improvement in their public safety, as a 36-year-old male teacher from Anbar province stated:

for several years, there was always killings and kidnappings occurring. I do not like IS, I do not agree with what they did, but they did make it safer for us to go outside.

However, among Syrian interviewees, notably those from Aleppo, Deir az-Zur, and Hasakah cities, IS's public security narratives were dismissed on the basis that IS-occupation brought greater amounts of aerial shelling to these areas. As a 40-year-old housewife from Deir az-Zur stated:

there was no public security, after IS took over. There was non-stop shelling from whoever were trying to hit Daesh. We were too afraid to go out, but also too afraid to be in our houses.

For these residents, IS's claim of bringing greater public security was further undermined by the group's tactic of using residents' houses, hospitals, and other public buildings as makeshift offices and barracks. These buildings were often unmarked and situated in residential areas with the expectation that they would be less likely to be targeted. IS's strategy of using its resident population as human shields appeared to occur more frequently towards the end of its period of territorial control. A 36-year-old male electrician from Mayadin, al-Khayr province, who voluntarily worked for IS in Raqqa for two years, explained:

IS didn't really care about us and our security in the end. They used us as barriers to protect themselves. All the good stuff they did in the beginning was destroyed by the way they used and abandoned us.

Thus, civilians' perception of the quality of public security provided by IS varied across the duration of IS's rule. The general perception among residents was that public security waned over time, as IS's control over a particular area diminished and its resources dwindled. As a 33-year-old female teacher from Mosul explained:

the first year-and-a-half were very secure. It was among the safest I have felt. There was almost no kidnapping and random shootings. I could walk freely, with a Maḥram [*guardian*] of course. But then the government started attacking IS and we became afraid to go out again.

Interestingly, IS was often not blamed for the diminishing conditions of public security. Rather, the various domestic and international entities attacking IS were held responsible. There were frequent expressions of regret and nostalgia among interviewees for the public security that IS brought, especially in comparison to the relative absence of public security in former IS-held areas. As a 42-year-old male oil engineer from Tikrit, Salah al-Din province, expressed:

[72]'Campling Down on Sexual Deviance', *Dabiq*, p. 43.
[73]'Paradigm Shift: Part II', *Dabiq*, No. 12 (2015), pp. 47–50 (p. 48).
[74]Ibid.

I don't agree with IS really but at least I could go to work without being harassed and being too afraid.

Nonetheless, the severity with which IS punished its residents also seemed to increase alongside its weakening public security provision. This is something researcher by others, notably Revkin and Jebari in Mosul.[75] As an unemployed 25-year-old male from al-Barakah province stated:

Punishments became harsher and harsher over time. Previously, they took time to investigate allegations against persons thoroughly. But at the end they just executed you without questioning the allegations.

Thus, IS's abandonment, over time, of its own previous security and justice standards seemed to undermine the acceptance of the provision of security narratives previously acknowledged by some civilians living in IS-controlled territory.

Provision of basic services

In different contexts set out by *Dabiq*, there was a clear concern regarding the 'needs' of individuals living in IS-controlled territory. In a meeting with local tribes covered in the first issue, IS's head of Tribal Affairs affirmed that one of the purposes of such a meeting was 'working to fulfil their [the tribe's] needs'.[76] In the third issue, it was affirmed that 'It is for this reason that the Islamic State has long maintained an initiative that sees it waging its jihād alongside a da'wah [proselytism of Islam] campaign that actively tends to the needs of its people.'[77] And in an article entitled 'A Window into the Islamic State', it was explained why '[t]he soldiers of Allah do not liberate a village, town or city, only to abandon its residents and ignore their needs.'[78] Like the Prophet before him, the Khilāfah aimed to ensure that the needs of the Muslims were met. In this vein, IS not only engaged in battle, but also took care of the 'worldly affairs of the Muslims,'[79] such as occupying administrative positions and maintaining the institutions on which the population relied. This article was surrounded by images whose captions stated some of the areas in which IS had been providing services, including repairing a bridge in al-Khayr province, restoring electricity in the city of Raqqa, and providing cancer treatment for children in Nineveh, street cleaning services, and a care home for the elderly in Nineveh.

An article entitled 'Healthcare in the Khilāfah' stated that IS ran 'a host of medical facilities including hospitals and clinics in all major cities through which it is offering a wide range of medical services … This infrastructure is aided by a widespread network of pharmacies run by qualified pharmacists and managed under the supervision and control of the Health Dīwān.'[80] In this article, IS also claimed the opening of a Medical College in Raqqa and a College for Medical Studies in Mosul, which could be attended for free by both men and women, and whose living expenses were covered.

The provision of food was also a recurrent theme throughout *Dabiq*. In the meeting with local tribes, 'the availability of food products and commodities in the market, particularly bread' was promised.[81] In an article on Ramadan, images of food being distributed 'to the needy' for the iftār [after sunset] meal were showcased.[82]

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[75] Mara Redlich Revkin and Delair Jebari, *West Mosul: Perceptions on Return and Reintegration among Stayees, IDPS and Returnees* (Baghdad: IOM Iraq Mission, 2019).

[76] 'Halab Tribal Assemblies', *Dabiq*, No. 1 (2014), pp. 12–15 (p. 13).

[77] 'Da'wah and Hisbah in the Islamic State', *Dabiq*, p. 16.

[78] 'A Window into the Islamic State', *Dabiq*, No. 4 (2014), pp. 27–9 (p. 27).

[79] Ibid.

[80] 'Healthcare in the Khilāfah', *Dabiq*, No. 9 (2015), pp. 25–6 (p. 25).

[81] 'Halab Tribal Assemblies', *Dabiq*, p. 13.

[82] 'Ramadan: A Blessed Month', *Dabiq*, No. 2 (2014), p. 35.

The general perception among the civilians interviewed confirmed that IS initially expended significant resources to provide public services to its residents. However, the amount and quality of such services differed across its territory and, overall, failed to replicate the basic service provision of the previous Iraqi government and Syrian regime. IS created a wide-ranging apparatus of governing institutions to manage basic service provision in each Iraqi and Syrian province under its control. The public service institutions most frequently mentioned by the civilians included the *Dīwān al-Ṣaḥah* (Ministry of Health), *Dīwān al-Khadmāt al-ʿĀmah* (Ministry of Public Services), *ʾIdārah al-Muwāṣalāt* (Administration of Transport), and *ʾIdārah al-Kahrabāʾ* (Administration of Electricity), among others.

Civilians who were financially dependent on state benefits and charity tended to be happier with IS's public service provision than their working counterparts, regardless of the individual's location. IS was perceived by these civilians as giving more generous monetary and material support, in the form of *zakāh* (obligatory charitable alms), than both other armed groups or the previous Iraqi government and Syrian regime. As one 55-year-old disabled father of six from Raqqa stated:

> I loved the Islamic State. They took better care of myself and my family. I received money each month from the zakāh office, around 90 USD, with extra stipend for the children and wife, and they gave me meat, rice, oil and sugar every few weeks. I pray to God for them to return.

This *zakāh* collection, which mainly benefited the poor, was mirrored in *Dabiq*. In the first issue, concern was expressed regarding 'collecting the zakah and presenting it to the zakah offices located throughout the wilayah preparing lists with the names of orphans, widows and the needy so that zakah and sadaqah[83] can be distributed to them'.[84] (In the second issue it was said that '[t]he Zakāh Ministry (Dīwān) in the city of Ar-Raqqah began distributing the zakāh to eligible families in the area. Its offices in other regions of the Islamic State were likewise busy collecting and distributing the zakāh.'[85] Additionally, in the twelfth issue, it was affirmed that the 'reality of the Caliphate is confirmed by many things', being one of them that '[t]he zakāh system has been up and running, taking a percentage of peoples' wealth and dispersing it to the poor.'[86]

Nonetheless, it was equally affirmed in *Dabiq* that individuals performing liberal professions were successful in the caliphate – 'Doctors and engineers, particularly those managing the IS-controlled oilfields, are paid handsomely – at least double, and often several-fold the salaries offered in other parts of the country' – which was starting to attract industry – 'Businesses are now choosing to move their industry into IS areas.'[87]

However, we found strong discontent among employed civilians interviewed regarding the public services offered by IS. Almost universally the provision of electricity, gas, water, food, public transport, education, and healthcare was deemed to be worse than that provided by the Iraqi government and the Syrian regime. Yet these civilians did not necessarily perceive the public service provision failures to be the exclusive fault of IS, as much of the essential infrastructure required for services was destroyed in the Iraqi and Syrian conflict. There was a general understanding that the supply of gas, water, electricity, and food was disrupted by warfare that was often outside the control of IS. Indeed, some civilians remaining in areas liberated from IS did not notice a huge increase in public services provision after IS fled. As a 32-year-old handyman from al-Bukamel, al-Khayr province, said:

> things [basic services] definitely got worse over time, but IS had to use all its fighters to hold its border posts and then the town. IS had to fight the Russians, Hezbollah, the Iranians, everyone.

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[83]Sadaqah is voluntary charitable giving, in comparison with the obligatory nature of *zakāh*.
[84]'Halab Tribal Assemblies', *Dabiq*, p. 14.
[85]'Ramadan: A Blessed Month', *Dabiq*, p. 35.
[86]'Paradigm Shift: Part II', *Dabiq*, p. 47.
[87]Ibid., p. 48.

I don't know if everything would have been better if IS were left alone? But I think that it would almost certainly be better than it is now.

We also found a general perception that across its territory, the limited public services that IS provided significantly diminished over the duration of its rule. In many areas, there was a honeymoon period where IS initially devoted significant resources on its public service provision to the contentment of its residents. As a 24-year-old male electrician from Hasakah, al-Barakah province, who worked for the Administration of Electricity, reported:

In the beginning was great. IS employed us all [those who previously worked as electricians for the government] to repair the power lines and to provide civilians with at least a few hours of electricity.

Over time, however, IS diverted resources away from public services towards its military operations, resulting in a simultaneous reduction in the perceived quality of these services. Furthermore, there was a perception that IS members became more corrupt over time and hoarded the only available food, gas, electricity, and medicine for themselves. As the same electrician reported:

By the end, our main job was to work on delivering any available electricity to IS members. Each member got a certain amount of bars (hours) of electricity as part of their salary. Ordinary people had nothing; it was all going to IS.

A common perception among the civilian interviewees was that IS had stronger public service provision in the provinces in which it had both a greater tax base to exploit and less military personnel to pay. IS derived many taxes from markets, shops, farms, and business, which it spent on public service provision in the same province where the taxes were collected.[88] Similarly, the province had to pay the salaries of any IS military personnel located in its province from both these provincial taxes and money provided by the federal treasury (*Bayt al-Māl al-Muslimīn*). A province like Raqqa, for instance, was perceived to have more money to spend on public service provision, compared to al-Khayr province, as Raqqa had many functioning businesses and markets, along with less military personnel, due to the passive nature of the conflict in that area. Interviewees often expressed jealously over the comparatively better service provision between provinces. As one widowed housewife in her fifties from Deir az-Zur, al-Khayr province, stated:

They had it much easier in Raqqa. A lot more money in comparison. They had free bread, better healthcare, cleaner streets, whereas we had nothing. My sister lived there and we used to try and travel there when we could. It was a lot better.

Thus, civilians felt that IS initially expended significant resources on providing basic services, although the amount and quality of these services differed across its territory, with a noticeable variation between those areas with a stronger tax base. In general, IS's capacity for service provision diminished over time due to a combination of its increased need to focus on warfare and higher levels of corruption among its members.

Social cohesion

IS's approach to social cohesion appeared to be similar across the diverse communities it governed in Iraq and Syria between 2014 and 2018. IS created top-down narratives regarding its ideal form of social cohesion, which excluded any persons not conforming to its conception of an ideal Sunni Arab, and then imposed it on its population through reinforcing legal apparatus and governing structures.

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[88]This was in comparison with taxes collected on oil, gas, and other natural resources which were sent to the federal treasury for redistribution among the provinces, primarily through the *Diwan al-Rikāz* (Ministry of Natural Resources).

Three types of sectarianism were clearly present throughout *Dabiq*: anti-Kurdish, anti-Shi'a, and anti-Yazidi. Anti-Kurdish sectarianism was rooted in IS's loathing regarding 'Kurdish secularists',[89] which included the 'Kurdish communists' that compose the 'PKK [Kurdistan Workers' Party] and their Iraqi counterparts, the Pershmerga'.[90] It was made clear that IS anti-Kurdish sectarianism was motivated by religion, not politics:

> Our war with Kurds is a religious war. It is not a nationalistic war – we seek the refuge of Allah. We do not fight Kurds because they are Kurds. Rather we fight the disbelievers amongst them, the allies of the crusaders and Jews in their war against the Muslims. As for the Muslim Kurds, then they are our people and brothers wherever they may be.[91]

The narratives of delegitimisation and dehumanisation of Kurdish forces were, thus, highly prevalent across *Dabiq*. The PKK was held responsible, for example, for 'narcotics trafficking in Europe' and the audience was reminded that this organisation was labelled as terrorist by Western standards.[92] Peshmerga fighters were seen as 'fainthearted mercenaries void of any creed who only wait for their meagre wages'.[93] The PKK was also depicted as an effective armed flank of the Syrian regime, thus, a target to be shot down – 'the PKK ruled parts of Halab, ar-Raqqah, and al-Barakah in agreement with the Nusayrī regime and were tasked by Bashar with crushing the Muslims revolting against his regime in these regions.'[94]

Anti-Shi'a sectarianism was underpinned by the Salafi-Jihadi religious views held by IS, which glorified the annihilation of Shi'a forces – 'O soldiers of the Islamic State, what a great thing you have achieved by Allah! Your reward is upon Him. By Allah, He has healed the chests of the believers through the killing of the nusayriyyah and rāfidah[95] at your hands. Allah!'[96] – and the enslavement of Shi'a women, defended by some – 'some of the scholars including Shaykhul-Islām Ibn Taymiyyah and the Ahnāf (Hanafis) say they [Shi'a women] may be enslaved due to the actions of the Companions during the Wars of Apostasy where they enslaved the apostate women'.[97] The 13th issue of *Dabiq* featured one article claiming that IS would wipe out the entire global population of Shiites, who were American allies and 'mushrik [polytheist] apostates who must be killed wherever they are to be found, until no Rafidi [Shiite] walks on the face of earth'.[98]

Anti-Yazidi sectarianism was not an original feature of IS.[99] *Dabiq* showcased some historical consciousness, pointing out that for 1,400 years Muslims did not force conversions and tolerated religious differences next to them.[100] However, IS saw such tolerance as a mistake that they were correcting through mass violence and in the fourth issue of *Dabiq* openly presented the genocide of the Yazidi community, justified by their religious identity, their ideology, and their reading of religious texts.[101]

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[89]'From Hijrah to Khilafah', *Dabiq*, No. 1 (2014), pp. 34—41 (p. 34).

[90]'The Fight against the PKK', *Dabiq*, No. 2 (2014), pp. 12–13 (p. 12).

[91]'Excerpts from "Indeed Your Lord is Ever Watchful" by the Official Spokesman for the Islamic State', *Dabiq*, No. 4 (2014), pp. 6–9 (p. 9).

[92]'Reflections on the Final Crusade', *Dabiq*, No. 4 (2014), pp. 39–44 (p. 41).

[93]Ibid.

[94]'And Allah is the Best of Plotters', *Dabiq*, No. 9 (2015), pp. 50–9 (p. 57).

[95]Derogatory term for Shia Muslims.

[96]'Excerpts from "Indeed Your Lord is Ever Watchful"' by the official spokesman for the Islamic State"', pp. 6–9 (p. 6).

[97]'The Revival of Slavery Before the Hour', *Dabiq*, No. 4 (2013), pp. 14–15 (p. 15).

[98]'The Rāfidah: From Ibn Saba' to the Dajjāl', *Dabiq*, No. 13 (2016), pp. 32–45 (p. 45).

[99]Vichen Cheterian, 'ISIS Genocide against the Yazidis and Mass Violence in the Middle East', *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies* (2019), available at: {DOI: 10.1080/13530194.2019.1683718}.

[100]'The Revival of Slavery Before the Hour', *Dabiq*.

[101]Ibid.

Beyond these three types of IS sectarianism and despite, theoretically, allowing Christians and other minorities to remain in its territory,[102] *Dabiq* published several issues dedicated to threatening the annihilation of Christians. The fourth issue included a story asserting that '[e]very Muslim should get out of his house, find a crusader and kill him.'[103] Moreover, former IS spokesman Abu Muhammad al-Adnani was quoted in the article urging readers to attack Westerners and Christians 'wherever they can be found'.[104] This was confirmed by interviews with Iraqi and Syrian civilians who felt that IS's concept of social cohesion did not allow for the integration of any Iraqi or Syrian who was not a Sunni Arab Muslim. IS's social cohesion in Iraq or Syria was conversely achieved by either expelling, killing, or enslaving any persons who did not conform to IS's religious preconceptions of acceptable persons. The overwhelming majority of these interviewees agreed that IS had a sectarian approach to social cohesion, founded on its claims to be implementing God's will. The laws established by IS across its territory reinforced the population's behaviour to conform to its expectation of a model Sunni Arab citizen. Residents' clothes, social interaction, hair, and beard length, among many other issues, were standardised and any public or private deviation from these norms was heavily punished. Social cohesion was, therefore, created by residents' compliance to the authority of IS. As a 25-year-old unemployed male Mosul resident, who fled IS's rule after 18 months, stated:

> IS were creating robots and they were quite successful for a while. Everyone looked the same, acted the same, and were heavily punished if they deviated from this. Of course there was resistance, but it was very small-scale, compliance was the norm.

Due to the sensitivities of discussing this topic, it is difficult to draw firm conclusions regarding civilian's attitudes towards IS's highly selective and sectarian social cohesion policy. The largest survey of civilians in Mosul revealed contrasting attitudes to the Islamic State's social cohesion policies, although there was wide-scale acts of civil resistance that were not public demonstrations or manifestations, such as using mobile phones, listening to music or leaving the house without a male guardian.[105] Among those Iraqi civilians prepared to discuss the topic, a common theme was the comparison between IS's sectarian policies and those of the previous Iraqi Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki's government. IS's extreme approach to creating social cohesion through mass violence and genocide was, therefore, frequently equated to previous and ongoing policies of the Iraqi government. As one 27-year-old Sunni civil society male worker from Bashiqa, Nineveh province, explained:

> IS's aim is always to defend Sunnis. It did nothing worse than what Maliki did or what Iran is doing now. We used to be killed for being Sunni, we cannot travel now without the Iranians [the Popular Mobilization Forces] harassing us. We (the Sunni) need protection and IS can do that.

A common perception among interviewees was that IS's sectarian social cohesion narrative was received more favourably in those Iraqi and Syrian areas that were constituted mainly by Sunnis and were traditionally more religious, rural, and less educated. Areas most mentioned by interviewees included Raqqa (particularly the countryside), al-Furat, Nineveh, and Anbar provinces. Interviewees felt that the population in these areas more easily accepted the Islamic claims of IS, particularly that it represented God and that to contravene or resist its actions was blasphemy. As a housewife in her thirties from Deir az-Zur, al-Khayr province, remarked:

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[102]Wood, 'What ISIS Really Wants'; Mara Redlich Revkin, 'Does the Islamic State Have a "Social Contract"?' (Gothenburg: Program on Governance and Local Development, University of Gothenburg, 2016).

[103]'Reflections on the Final Crusade', *Dabiq*, p. 44.

[104]Ibid.

[105]Svensson Isak, Daniel Finnbogason, Dino Krause, Luís Martínez Lorenzo, and Nanar Hawach, *Confronting the Caliphate: Civil Resistance in Jihadist Proto-States* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2022).

> It was hard for IS here, we didn't believe what they said. In Raqqa and Mosul, people are ignorant; they believe everything IS says about Islam. It was so easy for IS to do whatever they wanted.

While a 39-year-old male engineer from al-Khayr province further stated:

> IS were accepted everywhere it took over that were homogenous. In some areas of Raqqa, they had not met a Shia or Christian. It was easy for IS to spread lies about other groups because they had never met them. That isn't the case in Aleppo.

Interviewees mentioned that actors with the greatest ability to resist the narratives of IS's social cohesion were those with individual economic resources or who were pivotal for the functioning of IS's state. IS was heavily reliant on a network of outside actors to support its economic activities. These included oil traders and smugglers, oil and natural gas engineers, and antiquities experts, among many others.[106] These persons frequently held similar roles under the previous Iraqi government and Syrian regime. Multiple interviewees who held these pivotal economic roles reported they were less impacted by IS's attempts to impose its social cohesion narrative on the population. An oil engineer who worked on fields in al-Furat province for the Syrian regime and then for IS, reported how the Tunisian IS head of the plant unsuccessfully attempted to stop the workers smoking and surfing the Internet, which was in contravention of IS's laws, after it took over the plant:

> We all threatened to leave the plant if they tried to enforce these stupid laws. The standoff went on for several weeks with the Tunisian, until the Emir of the entire Diwan al-Rikaz came to mediate. IS ended up removing the Tunisian and allowed us to do what we wanted – we were too valuable to lose.

Thus, the perception of civilians was that IS enforced a social cohesion narrative among its population through laws and governing institutions. IS did not accept any public or private deviation from its ideal of the Sunni Arab, although persons with greater economic resources had greater flexibility than ordinary civilians.

Finally, regarding social cohesion, tribal affairs were a key area of concern to IS. IS established an Office of Tribal Affairs that attempted to learn from the previous failures of IS in managing tribal relations.[107] The first issue of *Dabiq* depicted meetings between IS's head of tribal affairs and tribal representatives 'in an effort to strengthen the ranks of the Muslims, unite them under one imam, and work together towards the establishment of the prophetic Khilafah.'[108] In these meetings, the head of tribal affairs stressed the benefits and services provided by IS to the tribes whose bay'ah [oath] had been accepted:

> returning rights and property to their rightful owners; pumping millions of dollars into services that are important to the Muslims; the state of security and stability enjoyed by the areas under the Islamic State's authority; ensuring the availability of food products and commodities in the market, particularly bread; the reduced crime rate; the flourishing relationship between the Islamic State and its citizens.[109]

In return:

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[106]Erika Solomon and Ahmed Mhidi, 'Isis Inc.', *Financial Times* (15 October 2015); Jamie Hansen-Lewis and Jacob N. Shapiro, 'Understanding the Daesh economy', *Perspectives on Terrorism*, 9:4 (2015), pp. 142–55.

[107]Whiteside and Elallame, 'Accidental ethnographers'.

[108]'Halab Tribal Assemblies', *Dabiq*, No. 1 (2014), pp. 12–15 (p. 12).

[109]Ibid., p. 14.

the Islamic State (may Allah honor it) requested from its dignified, Arab tribes, and in particular the tribe of Banu Sa'id, their backing, support, allegiance, advice, and du'a'. It also requested that they assist the Islamic State with their wealth, their sons, their men, their weapons, their strength and their opinion, and encourage their sons and their brothers to join the military body of the Islamic State.[110]

However, when tribes chose to resist IS rule, the consequences were dire. This was covered in the third issue of *Dabiq* to explain, particularly to the Western audience, why whole tribes were being annihilated. The baseline was that 'any tribe or party or assembly whose involvement and collaboration with the crusaders and their apostate agents are confirmed, then by He who sent Muhammad with the truth, we will target them just as we target the crusaders.'[111]

Conclusion

IS's strategic narrative was typical of jihadist groups, with a specific enthusiasm for the creation of a caliphate – a state for all Muslims – and a statebuilding project mirroring Al-Qaeda's approach of creating an insecure environment through extreme violence and imposing conservative religious views that encompassed all aspects of people's lives.[112] The main audience of IS's strategic narrative was the transnational community of jihadists and local Sunni Muslims opposed to the regimes in Baghdad and Damascus,[113] who were able to see it enacted in IS's seized territory in both Iraq and Syria.

By declaring a state and announcing the restoration of the caliphate, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi made IS's ability to rule and govern the determinant of success. IS attempted to provide the same services that a nation-state offers to its citizens but in a more ethical manner.[114] For certain commentators, 'available evidence indicates that IS has indeed demonstrated the capacity to govern both rural and urban areas in Syria that it controls.'[115] For others, mostly Western commentators, 'the record shows [jihadists] repeatedly failing at governance efforts.'[116]

In this article, we analysed IS's strategic narrative of governance and statebuilding transmitted through *Dabiq* regarding three main factors: provision of security, provision of basic services, and social cohesion. We also showcased how such a narrative was received by citizens living under IS's rule in Syria and Iraq. In terms of provision of security, IS's ability to control looting in its territory attracted the sympathy of many locals, who felt able to carry on with their lives. IS's provision of security was perceived by some locals as protection from the chaos created by state failure and conflict. However, for many locals, IS never stopped being perceived as a personal security threat due to its strategy of using highly populated areas as human shields and to the severe punishments inflicted on locals. To tackle this issue, IS leaned on the narrative that its rule was more palatable than that of the corrupt leaders of Syria and Iraq.

IS has been described as the most efficient and capable group in providing basic services to locals in Syria's non-government-controlled areas.[117] This was due to its inflexible ruling over well-structured institutions (e.g., sharia courts) and control of vast resources (e.g., oil wells and flour mills), which generated profits and allowed the flow of humanitarian aid supplies and other efforts to ameliorate locals' daily lives. The compliance of locals with such taxes was related to violent

[110]Ibid.

[111]'The Punishment of Shu'aytāt for Treachery', *Dabiq*, p. 12.

[112]Isaac Kfir, 'Social identity group and human (in)security', *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism*, 38:4 (2015), pp. 233–52.

[113]Brown, 'Public diplomacy, networks, and the limits of strategic narratives'.

[114]Charles Lister, 'Profiling the Islamic State', Paper No. 13 (Doha: Brookings Doha Center, 2014).

[115]Charles Caris and Samuel Reynolds, 'ISIS Governance in Syria', Middle East Security Report 22 (Washington, DC: Institute for the Study of War, 2014), p. 4.

[116]Daveed Gartenstein-Ross and Amichai Magen, 'The jihadist governance dilemma', *Washington Post – Monkey Cage* (18 July 2014).

[117]Rana Khalaf, 'Governance without government in Syria', *Syria Studies*, 7:3 (2015), pp. 37–72.

coercion exerted by IS, as well as by the fact that many people benefited from the services provided by IS. However, we found out that the amount and quality of basic services differed across time – residents felt that at the beginning IS was committed to the provision of basic services but over time such efforts were deflected to support the ongoing conflict and were also abused by corrupt IS members – and space – residents affirmed that the provision of basic services was better in areas with a stronger tax base.

Finally, IS experienced some successful opposition to its rule from traditional, tribal, ethnic, and religious groups. Some tribes in Deir Ez-Zor managed to resist IS's control over its territory, and some Islamic charities managed to provide food and shelter to the internally displaced in Aleppo.[118] Nonetheless, other tribes (e.g., Al-Baryedje) provided essential support to IS both in terms of human resources and in the spread of its vision. For these purposes, a tribal affairs office existed within the sharia courts in different IS-controlled locations to co-opt tribal members and pre-empt any regional efforts against IS's rule.[119]

The findings in this article suggest that IS's narrative of statebuilding transmitted through *Dabiq* did not only attract about thirty thousand foreign fighters from 85 different countries,[120] but was also consistent with its approach on the ground, as confirmed by different interviewees. A better understanding of how IS's strategic narratives of statebuilding contributed to advance their project, as well as issues on the ground that were negatively and positively accepted, may help scholars grasp the causes of success and demise of emergent statebuilding efforts.

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Raquel da Silva is Integrated Researcher at CEI-Iscte in Lisbon, Portugal and Assistant Professor of International Relations at the School of Economics, University of Coimbra, Portugal. She is the author of *Narratives of Political Violence: Life Stories of Former Militants* (2019). Her research has been funded by the Portuguese Foundation for Science and Technology, the British Academy, and the European Union, among others. Author's email: raquel.beleza.silva@iscte-iul.pt and Twitter profile: @RaquelBPSilva

Matthew Bamber-Zryd is the Adviser for Armed Groups at the International Committee of the Red Cross. Matthew is also a Doctoral Researcher at the Centre on Conflict, Development and Peacebuilding at the Graduate Institute, Geneva, and a Fellow at the Department of Peace and Conflict Research, Uppsala University. Author's email: matthew.bamber@graduateinstitute.ch and Twitter profile: @mattbam1

Dr Nicolas Lemay-Hebert is a Senior Lecturer at the International Relations Department, Coral Bell School of Asia Pacific Affairs, Australian National University. His research interests include peacebuilding and statebuilding, resistance to international interventions and the political economy of interventions. His next books include *The Law and Practice of International Peacekeeping* (Cambridge University Press, 2021; co-authored with R. Freedman and S. Wills) and *Normalization in World Politics* (Michigan University Press, 2021; co-authored with G. Visoka). Author's email: Nicolas.Lemay-Hebert@anu.edu.au

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[118]Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, 'After One Year of Releasing its Monetary Currency, ISIS Forces Money Transfer and Exchange Shops to Deal in the "Caliphate Currency"' (2017), available at: {http://www.syriahr.com/en/?p=68289}.

[119]Hassan Hassan, 'ISIS exploits tribal fault lines to control its territory', *The Guardian* (26 October 2014).

[120]Efraim Benmelech and Esteban F. Klor, 'What explains the flow of foreign fighters to ISIS?', *SSRN Electronic Journal* (2016), available at: {DOI: https://doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.2777466}.