The Uniqueness of ISIS: Achievements and Inevitable Setbacks 2014-2018

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ABSTRACT

This paper aims to understand the driving beliefs of those who join ISIS and unpick its unique nature, answering what makes ISIS exceptional. The paper assess how ISIS survives in the face of territorial setbacks and investigates ISIS from outer and inner perspectives, employing case study approach through primary and secondary literature to provide insight into the main differences between al-Qaeda and ISIS. Further, the paper traces the history of other terrorist movements in relation to changing geopolitics, and explores ISIS's profound relationship with millennials who in it find agency and instant gratification. Due to its ideological nature, its radical belief and its virtual relationship with world-wide followers, ISIS maintains the possibility of surviving and reproducing itself in another form despite its setback and lacking territory.

Keywords: ISIS, globalisation, millennials, virtual caliphate, social media, terrorism.

1. Introduction

Between 2014 and 2018 the world witnessed the rise of the terror phenomena that would become known as ISIS (Islamic State of Iraq and Syria), a self-claimed movement fighting on behalf of Islam, standing apart from its predecessor al-Qaeda and initiating a new era of fear and violence to spread across the globe. Firmly situated in the digital, globalized age, ISIS utilized cutting-edge technology to advance its techniques of recruitment and terror. These methods, teamed with establishing territories and hegemony over vulnerable Iraqi and Syrian people, was unprecedented with modern politics and previous Islamic movements.

A wealth of literature has been produced on the subject and the international community has taken many steps and measures to counter the group, including the establishment of an international coalition. Yet military efforts have resulted in ISIS losing its territories and being forced underground, and eliminating it has become more complicated. Understanding its driving beliefs and the beliefs of those who join it is paramount to unpicking its exceptional nature.

Leading research that is explored in this paper comes to see ISIS as a separate phenomenon that must be analyzed on its own terms as it constitutes a militia, a territorial authority, or even a semi-state, unlike similar organizations. This paper argues that although ISIS has been studied as a part of the continuum of traditional terrorist organizations, its methods and territorial expansion have gone beyond any other terrorist group, including its former ally, al-Qaeda. Further, in doing so, the paper seeks to identify the essence of the movement that makes it unique. Finally, the paper will assess how ISIS's unique characteristics provide ability for it to survive despite its setback in 2018.

To answer the aforementioned questions and deal with the key assumption of this paper a case study approach will be employed in order to analyze primary and secondary literature on this subject matter. This method of research would enable the researcher to provide an in depth investigation and understanding for the correlation between different variables and dynamics that influenced the emergence and work of this group. Moreover, the paper investigates the movement from two perspectives, the outer and the inner, seeking to unravel both its material existence and its underlying spirit. First, under the subtitle "Background", the history of the movement will be a briefly discussed leading to an analysis in "Beyond Terrorism", of which aspects of ISIS fit the definition of a terrorist group and what separates ISIS from this definition, focusing especially on its divergence from al-Qaeda. The paper will then discuss in "Setbacks from

Losing Loyalty" how these differences fed into ISIS's strategy, resulting in both the rise and fall of ISIS in the Levant.

The second half of this paper will build upon the argument that ISIS is indeed a militia owing to more than a terrorist network, aiming to determine the base of the group's appeal as it perceives itself as a caliphate that represents the resurgence of true Islam in the section "A Resurgence of Islam". ISIS is now largely discussed as nothing more than an escape route for frustrated youth and by way of referring to the globalized, western methods of ISIS, such as its use of social media and branding, the group has been mocked on its self-proclaimed purity. While admitting that disregarding the religious nature of ISIS is overly simplistic, in "Agency and Gratification", this paper will contest the view that religion is the core magnet for ISIS recruits, and instead, in "A Virtual Caliphate", explores ISIS contextually within a post 9/11, globalized setting in order to understand both how it mobilizes so successfully, and to explore the validity of claims that ISIS has been defeated. Through this structure the paper will be able to explore the exceptional features of ISIS and its ability to survive with or without territory.

It is worth noting that ISIS has various aliases, including Daesh (derived from its Arabic acronym), ISIL (Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant), and IS (Islamic State). However, ISIS is the most commonly used name, which this paper will therefore use throughout its discussion.

2. Background

ISIS is a militant group, that follows an extremist interpretation of Islam. It is seen to follow a Wahhabi doctrine of Sunni Islam. The group believes it represents a pure form of Islam and holds its caliph to be the successor of the Prophet. Some have also seen it as part of a continuum of modern-day jihadism[1] emanating from the Muslim Brotherhood (Hussain, 2014).

The foundation of the group is seen to lie in the US invasion of Iraq in 2003 and the following marginalization of Iraq's political and military elite. ISIS filled a power vacuum created by the US, which can be attested by the fact that many former Iraqi Baathist military officers are now part of its operations (Cronin, 2016). Yet, the group's origins were formed years before this, in a group called *Jama'at al-Tawhid wa-al-Jihad*.[2] This group was founded by the Jordanian Abu Musab aI-Zarqawi in 1999 (Zelin, 2014). Zarqawi was a militant Islamist who sought training with the *Mujahedeen* in Afghanistan in the 1980s, but failed to join the troops. He nevertheless managed to interact with lslamists from across the world, and later to train in one of al-Qaeda's camps. During this time, Zarqawi also came to embrace Salafism[3] under the teachings of Sheikh Abu Muhammad al-Maqdisi, an influential Salafist cleric. In 1992, Zarqawi was imprisoned in Jordan for the possession of guns and explosives. After being released he returned to Afghanistan, where he met Osama Bin Laden. This was the beginning of strong ties between al-Qaeda and Zarqawi's movement. Yet the two could not agree on various religious aspects and their respective movements did not merge. Most significantly, Zarqawi wanted to focus on the near enemy, the infidels in the Middle East, where as Bin Laden was more concerned with attacking the "far enemy", namely the West (Weaver, 2006).

In 2003, the *Jama'at al-Tawhid wal-Jihad* participated in the Iraq insurgency against the US invasion and for the next three years the group was involved in violent attacks around the country. In 2004, the group was added to the US's list of Foreign Terrorist Organizations (U.S. Department of State) and in the same year Zarqawi finally paid *Bay'ah*[4] to Bin Laden and the group became known as the al-Qaeda of Iraq (AQI). However, in 2006 a US airstrike killed Zarqawi, and shortly after, the group announced the establishment of the Islamist State in Iraq.

Following two previous leaders, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, the current caliph of ISIS, was announced as the new emir

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1 *Jihadism*: "…a term that has been constructed in Western languages to describe militant Islamic movements that are perceived as existentially threatening to the West." (Hammer, 2012, p. 263)

2 *Jama'at al-Tawhid wa-al-Jihad* [Organization of Monotheism and Jihad].

3 *Salafi*: A member of a strictly orthodox Sunni Muslim sect advocating a return to the early Islam of the Koran and Sunna. (Oxford Dictionary)

4 *Bayah*: "Oath of allegiance to a leader." (Oxford Reference)

in 2010. Al-Baghdadi was a former inmate of Camp Bucca, an American detention center in Iraq, in keeping with the fact that the networks formed in American detention centers in Iraq were crucial to the formation of AQI (Solomon, 2016, pp. 5-10). In addition, the ground for extremism in the country was fertile, and when civil war in Syria erupted in 2011, the tensions worked in favor of ISIS, when went on to fight in Syria under the name of al-Nusra Front, capturing territory in northeast Syria (Glenn, 2016; Cronin, 2015). The brutality and sectarianism of the Shiite-Alawite regime of Assad had strengthened the division between Shias and Sunnis, validating the rejection of Shiism in the minds of many Sunni Arabs. In 2013, a power struggle between ISIS and al-Qaeda emerged following al-Baghdadi's announcement of the unification of ISIS and al-Nusra. Al-Qaeda's current leader, Ayman al-Zawahiri, demanded that ISIS step under its rule, which ISIS refused to do, and finally in 2014, al-Qaeda publicly cut ties with ISIS (Zelin, 2014, pp. 4-5).

ISIS has indeed improved upon its former partner in many ways. Crucially, in many respects the decision of ISIS to vouch allegiance to al-Qaeda in 2003 can be seen as a tactical move from both sides. Zarqawi profited from the al-Qaeda franchise whereas Bin Laden benefited from establishing a presence in Iraq (Weaver, 2006).

3. Beyond Terrorism

According to the scholar Bruce Hoffman, terrorism is distinguished from other forms of crime by its political nature, its violence and its aim to create far-reaching psychological repercussions. Terrorism is an action conducted by a subnational group, a non-state entity that forms an organization with a chain of command, a cell structure, or by individuals directly influenced by a terrorist group (Hoffman, 2006, p. 40). In short, terrorism can be defined as "unlawfully using violence and intimidation, especially against civilians, in the pursuit of political aims" (Oxford Dictionaries). While it is evident that in many respects ISIS has broken away from the traditional description of a terrorist group, this paper seeks to answer which aspects of ISIS correspond with these definitions.

In her article, "ISIS is not a Terrorist Group" (2014), Professor Audrey Kurth Cronin compares ISIS with traditional terrorist groups, finding several differences. For instance, terrorist networks are generally relatively small in membership, do not usually attack civilians or hold territory, and are incapable of confronting military forces. In contrast to this, the estimation of ISIS membership was 20,000 and 30,000, (Levitt, 2017), including many foreign fighters, as of 2018, which shows little to no drop in popularity from their peak in 2015/16. Further, the movement managed to capture large areas of land in Iraq and Syria using highly sophisticated military operations. This is why Cronin comes to determine ISIS as a "pseudo-state led by a conventional army" (2015). She also stresses how effective the administrative structure of ISIS is, consisting of a military command led by an emirate and a large civilian bureaucracy (Cronin, 2015).

In examining the extraordinary nature of ISIS, three characteristics stand out. Firstly, ISIS differs from other jihadist movements in its model of funding as the group has become largely self-sustaining. The ransom payments demanded for hostages have largely stolen the focus on the media, yet they form only a small part of the finances of ISIS. It funds its operations by selling oil on the black market, selling the property and goods confiscated from conquered areas and has even produced cotton and wheat for sale. Yet the factor that most clearly demonstrates the uniqueness of ISIS is perhaps its ability to tax the residents of its claimed territories. By taxing the movement of goods it targets owners as well as producers and has been able to build a highly profitable system (Cronin, 2015). Yet, a model that includes no opportunities for economic growth can only be upheld by continuous expansion. Further, by creating a semi-state, ISIS was in a governing position with hegemony over its people, providing services and security in return for loyalty.

Secondly, ISIS has been extremely successful in creating an alluring cause and recruiting followers. It has been able to mobilize individuals beyond the traditional scope of militia recruitment and has inspired attacks globally by individuals with no direct links to the group. The leaders of ISIS have claimed worldwide religious, political, and military authority over Muslims (Pew Research Center, 2015), although this has been vehemently rejected both by the public and officials (Robinson, 2015). Countries with a Muslim majority that have joined the Islamic Military Alliance, a military coalition against ISIS, include Turkey, Saudi Arabia, United Arab Emirates, Egypt and Jordan. The coalition's aim is to fight the Islamic world's problem with terrorism. From the perspective of these countries, ISIS is clearly a terrorist group.

Further, the requirement of political aims, which terrorist groups have traditionally made clear in petitions for political concessions. This was also the case with al-Qaeda, which, for instance called for the withdrawal of US forces from Saudi Arabia. ISIS on the other hand has refused to negotiate. It does not seek to achieve gains by threats, but instead urges its opponents to confront it. This derives from its conviction that political bargaining is against Islam and its belief in the coming apocalypse that makes negotiations futile. ISIS also fills Hoffman's requirement of an organizational command structure, yet, due to its successful international recruiting and the capture of vast land areas (Cronin, 2015), it can be questioned whether it still is a non-state entity or a sub-national group.

The perception of ISIS as a terrorist group is also to a large extent derived from its connections with other terrorist groups. Namely, ISIS has been seen to be an ideological successor of al-Qaeda. Yet this perception is largely false, as ISIS differs from al-Qaeda in many crucial respects. As explained earlier, the two movements share history, yet, they differ in background, leadership, and overall aims to the extent that some have come to view ISIS as the post-al-Qaeda jihadist threat. While al-Qaeda formed a terrorist network able to escape its enemies by going underground, the rationale of existence for ISIS is the occupation of land. Further, ISIS sees Shi'ism as apostasy and has taken the concept of *taqfir*[5] much further than al-Qaeda (Wood, 2015), which was brought into light when ISIS occupied land in Iraq. While al-Qaeda did not have to face Shias on the ground, ISIS existed in territories that contained both sects, and was forced to exclude Shias from its caliphate, thus expanding the concept of *taqfir* between Muslims as a central element of ISIS's belief system. Furthermore, ISIS focused its central belief on the apocalypse and that they were waging an end of time war.

In this, a further crucial separating variable between the two movements is their strategies. Instead of working secretively and being ready to disappear from sight at any time, ISIS has made its troops visible to the whole world. ISIS is the first jihadist group to announce it has established a caliphate. In this sense it has separated itself not only from terrorist groups, but also from other jihadists, essentially demanding their allegiance. ISIS is seeking to become a central authority for all Muslims and at the same time downgrading the legitimacy of Islamist groups. Unlike traditional terrorist organizations it does not seek alliances but calls for unquestioning submission. The aim of ISIS to create a society is also reflected in its attempt to recruit both sexes, and remarkably, it has also managed to attract women to its troops in large amounts. This way it has attained legitimacy in its bid to represent a society. Due to its vast resources, captured territories, and the Saddam Hussein-era Iraqi officers in its military, ISIS has also been seen by some as resembling state-sponsored terrorists (Cronin, 2016).

Thus, ISIS is unique compared to other terrorist organizations that Hoffman identifies, due to its ability to form quick and significant support like al-Qaeda did, however it went further by occupying, expanding, and ruling within territories with legitimacy.

4. Setbacks from Losing Loyalty

ISIS's 2014 expansion into a fledgling state was enabled by a number of regional components, with the establishment of a loyal Sunni base being the primary facilitating factor. Following the US withdrawal, a Shia majority government was established in Iraq, contrary to the fallen Saddam Hussein's Sunni leadership. From fear of Hussein's Baathist legacy continuing in any form, the new government prohibited any Sunni presence in the central government, leading to Sunni protests in the streets of Iraq from 2012 onwards. Therefore, when ISIS declared the establishment of their state, they did so in Sunni territory, bringing the frustrated tribes under their wing by providing security and promising resistance to the central government and any other governments allied to the West.

In conjunction with targeting Sunni areas, ISIS continued to expand by targeting territories with natural resources, oil refineries, and banks, in order to increase their wealth and welfare (Bauer, 2018). This allowed them to sponsor areas under their control, meaning they were able to provide security and a sense of society to deprived Sunni areas. Therefore,

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5 *Taqfir:* "Justifying the killing of another Muslim by accusing them of heresy." (Zelin, 2014, p. 1)

despite its brutal techniques, ISIS was able to build a foundation of loyalty in the local people, and with Islamic slogans, they were able to provide something for the people to believe in, albeit briefly (Zelin, 2017).

This was mirrored in Syria, when ISIS invested in the existing chaos of the country, and offered the people a coherent message of resistance embalmed with Islamic rhetoric. Therefore, again in Syria, people allied themselves to the movement based on the shared value of resistance and the need for protection.

However, when the US declared their coalition against ISIS in Iraq in mid-2014, the Iraqi Sunnis began to lose their faith in ISIS, which appeared to be failing to fulfil the promises of resistance and security. Rather than delivering on these promises, the Sunnis instead merely witnessed the brutality of ISIS, which was now bringing them war rather than protection. Without the Sunni's support, ISIS could no longer expand within Iraq nor had anywhere to retreat to from the coalition forces. Indeed, on all sides the movement was faced by either a hostile Shia government (Iran), or stable countries that they could not penetrate (Turkey, Jordan etc). Therefore, the setbacks ISIS faced from the coalition resulted in an ever tightening noose as they began to lose territories containing natural resources, banks, and other forms of income generation (Bauer, 2018).

Without territory, success, or wealth, they were no longer able to feed or provide for their remaining citizens, who stopped believing in slogans such as 'Bring back Islam', and 'Make Mesopotamia a base to free all Muslims' (Dabiq, 2014). The Sunni people were not allied to them for their ideology, but for their security and resistance. Without these things, there was no longer any interest or faith, and they refused to fight for the movement.

Similarly, when ISIS invested in the chaos of Syria, establishing their base in Raqqa, they did so in the name of resistance, offering protection to the Syrian rebels and support for their anti-government agenda. Its compatibility with their cause allowed ISIS to expand within Syria, extending a base from Raqqa to the Syrian desert through the valley of Al Forat River, allowing them to reach Iraq and attempt to establish an interstate caliphate that would become the heart of their state (Uskowi, 2017).

In doing so, however, they had the sensitive task of trying to convince Iraqis and Syrians under their territories that their difficulties were similar and thus worthy of joining forces as citizens of the same caliphate state. However, they were unable to sell the idea of citizenship, a shared identity, nor Islamic slogans during this short period to convince them to stand together or fight. This fragmented situation resulted in ISIS becoming a foreign body ruling the Syrian and Iraqi territories, rather than being a resistance movement representing them from the inside out. The US-coalition planes circled Iraq, and the Russian-Iran coalition fought Syrians in Raqqa with the government, while also eating into ISIS territories, and both groups gave up on ISIS (Ammor, 2016).

However, even though ISIS was unable to instil commonalities or belief among citizens of its territories, their ideology and slogans still resonated with foreigners, who continued to support them both on the ground by travelling to the region, or by representation abroad.

While the state was experiencing these setbacks within its caliphate, it continued to expand abroad, and despite becoming increasingly limited territorially, more and more cells allying themselves to the movement and its ideology sprung up outside the region, and by 2018 ISIS had franchised into eight countries across Africa and Asia (Bauer, 2018, p. 2).

5.   A Resurgence of Islam

In light of these unprecedented events, ISIS proved itself to be more structurally sound and aspirational than a rouge terrorist group, leading to questions regarding its inner logic. Does ISIS genuinely seek to respond to what it sees as a resurgence of a historical period, *jahilyyah*, in a way that embodies 'true Islam'?

Instead of aspiring to gain legitimacy, ISIS embraced violence. It denied political parties and announced broad *taqfir* to Shiites. Another crucial theological characteristic of ISIS is its strong refusal of the Islamic concept of *irja*, literally translated as "postponing". This concept means postponing the question of who is a true Muslim to God and the afterlife, thus allowing Muslims to deviate from religious practices normally required in Islam. Muslims living a western liberal

lifestyle or adherents of Sufism can for instance be seen as living under *irja* (Akyol, 2015). By accusing other Islamic groups of *irja*, ISIS has sought to legitimatize its role as the judge of all Muslims.

Many public figures have rushed to deny any meaningful connection between true Islam and ISIS (The Guardian, 2014). Yet, the leading figures of ISIS take religious prudence very seriously. Thus it is crucial to take into consideration the religious nature of ISIS, as the group carefully justifies all its actions by religious texts and tradition. ISIS believes that the apocalypse is imminent, making it radically different from Islamic political groups that are ready to make compromises with their enemies. The group looks forward to the battle of *Dabiq*, where its separator, the Army of Rome, attacks in the 'Last Hour', i.e. a final war at the end of time (Brodman, 2017, p. 7). In this sense, they bring the theory of the Clash of Civilizations to reality and they consider the coalition intervening in Iraq and in Syria as the Army of Rome from the. Therefore, the unity of their enemies gave real legitimacy to their claim of the end of time.

In his article, "What ISIS Really Wants" in The Atlantic, journalist Graeme Wood develops the argument that failing to understand the underlying religious nature of ISIS may already have led to significant strategic errors in responding to it (Wood, 2015). Wood compares ISIS with al-Qaeda in highlighting the difference between a corporatized terror franchise playing with the rules of the West, and a theologically uncompromising group.

However, ironically, ISIS has made extreme and simplistic interpretations of Islam that are in keeping with typically Western perspectives of Islam, and Wood sees the movement's actions as logically derived from the Quran. Wood believes that enslaving, crucifying, and even taking women as concubines are all present in the tradition of Islam, and were even imposed by the Prophet. Wood argues that replicating the actions of the Prophet is a crucial part of epitomizing Islam, and therefore ISIS is following the 'true path' of Islam.

From Wood's perspective, ISIS represents an interpretation of the whole package of Islam, separating it from countries like Saudi Arabia, where aspects of a caliphate such as sharia law are implemented but other factors such as social welfare are excluded (Wood, 2015). Further, Wood contends that the most dangerous aspect of ISIS is its intellectual appeal. The uncompromising nature of the organization is part of its brand, making destroying its appeal ever more difficult. This interpretation relies on the idea that most of the core personnel of ISIS have strong religious convictions. Even though Wood, who uses interviews of educated people logically explaining their view on the legitimacy of ISIS, and draws a convincing sketch of the inner logic of ISIS, it is perhaps impossible to truly know or prove the religious, or other, motivations of ISIS.

Further, according to a German jihadist interviewed by author Jurgen Todenhöfer, a true believer would not leave the caliphate to carry out attacks in Europe (Wood, 2015). The fact that ISIS has lured alienated youth in Europe en masse, but failed to attain approval from those in Syria and Iraq and in surrounding countries, paints a more realistic portrait of the group (Pew Research Center, 2015). Further, attention must be called to the fact that Tunisia, the Arab country from which the largest amount of foreign fighters joined ISIS, is also arguably the most westernized one (Taylor, 2016). Indeed, Tunisia seems to confirm the view that is it mostly powerless and frustrated young men who join ISIS and are promised a collective identity and a moment of glory.

When considering the core countries of ISIS, i.e. Iraq and Syria, the circumstances that bred the movement are largely in line with the reasons locals are joining the organization. The power vacuums in Iraq and Syria point to the true cause being not religious allegiance, but frustration by Sunnis to their prevailing governments. Toby Dodge, a scholar at the International Institute for Strategic Studies, sees ISIS as the result of a power vacuum that derives its appeal from the absence of state power (Freedland, 2014). This explanation, emanating from a realist perspective of international relations is also bound in modernity, yet from a power politics view. From this perspective, we are to blame the lack of a global superpower for the rise of ISIS and religion becomes a symptom instead of a cause.

By referring to sacred Islamic texts as the foundations of ISIS, Wood presents the arguments of Muslims that oppose ISIS as illegitimate. Yet the actions of ISIS are not as logically simplistic as presented by Wood. Muslim scholars have highlighted that using religious texts and the Prophet's example, ISIS can present itself as a logical and legitimate interpretation of Islam. From the viewpoint of its defenders, it is indeed the only model of Islam that is acceptable. This

is reflected in how the defenders of ISIS have gone on to explain how waging jihad is obligatory, as it is derived from Islamic law, were the only temporary peace treaties are allowed (Wood, 2015).

Viewing ISIS as a reflection of Islam is problematic, as the demonization of Muslims worsens the overall security situation by creating a sense of detachment amongst European Muslims and thus working for the benefit of ISIS. This is perhaps why powerful characters such as Barack Obama have made statements seeking to separate ISIS from Islam (The Guardian, 2014). From the perspective of responding to the threat of ISIS understanding its inner essence is crucial, as truly destroying ISIS requires demolishing the root causes of it.

Thus, we should not deny the religious underpinnings of ISIS, as it created a religious narrative that celebrates the victory of the caliphate as inevitable. Thus, even if the core of ISIS appeals to religious doctrines, it is perhaps not so much true with its so-called followers. The western networks of ISIS seem to be largely unaffiliated to ISIS's central objective to achieve a caliphate. As explained, the motives of Western attackers vary and many of them have no religious background or do not uphold the main prohibitions of Islam, such as Ziyed Ben Belagcem, the Paris airport attacker of 2017 (Olaimy, 2017) and Salman Ramadan Abedi, Manchester Arena attacker of 2018 (Willsher, 2017). Accordingly, ISIS is merely a brand they use to seek maximum publicity for their actions. Wood rejects this view by presenting these individuals as lone wolves acting on their own, and unfinanced by ISIS.

Despite the arguments of Wood and Cronin, the actions of ISIS can also be contradicted by the holy texts of Islam (Jenkins, 2015), particularly seen with ISIS ignoring the legal tradition of interpreting the *hadiths*[6] present in Islam (Dagli, 2015). Seeing ISIS as some kind of culmination of Islam, a view implicitly put forward by Wood, turns them into another kind of threat. This threat feeds in to the clash of civilizations world view, where the Western world and the Muslim world are seen as ever incompatible. When we come to understand ISIS as part of a modern continuum, we also better understand the global nature of the problem. After all, Muslims all over the world have risen to condemn ISIS (Robinson, 2015). Thus, ISIS is not fighting solely the West, it is fighting the whole world.

The difference between ISIS and the majority of the worlds Muslims that have condemned ISIS is that ISIS justifies its actions by the belief that Muslims are in a similar situation to the early days of Islam and must fight infidels. Wood's essential argument is that the backward-looking and apocalyptic nature that West has come to derive is actually the being realized and is the most important essence of ISIS, meaning that ISIS is the embodiment of Western egocentric paranoia generated by globalization.

6. Agency and Gratification in the Age of ISIS

The most important period in the study of ISIS is that of 2016 and 2017, when ISIS was reduced from a caliphate into a rebel group within the Iraqi and Syrian territories. However, this reduction does not indicate eradication, and the problem of ISIS is still far from being solved. The territorial setbacks created by the US-led coalition during this period formed a siege around the movement and forced ISIS into enacting guerrilla warfare, resulting in the coalitions no longer having a clear territorial enemy. However, existing solely as an organisation, memories of Afghanistan's ongoing 18-year war have resurfaced, reminding the coalitions that eliminating al-Qaeda, which was also without territory, proved impossible. Indeed, the setbacks ISIS has faced cannot be considered a failure of ISIS, nor a victory of the coalitions because the movement still inspires those outside of the region who still believe in the Islamic slogans and ideology. However, if these core elements of ISIS cannot hold the belief of the individuals it came in direct contact with during its short reign, then what could the motivations for joining ISIS be for foreigners?

We can start to find an answer to this by again returning to al-Qaeda as a reference point. Where al-Qaeda stressed piety and legitimacy, ISIS offers something different: agency and immediacy. The group's ability to offer a mix of ideological and material enticements is perhaps one of the reasons it has been able to attract so many followers, essentially

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6 *Hadith*: "A collection of traditions containing sayings of the prophet Muhammad which, with accounts of his daily practice (the *Sunna*), constitute the major source of guidance for Muslims apart from the Koran." (Oxford Dictionaries)

making it a modern phenomenon. Further, al-Qaeda's 9/11 attack was its main achievement, shaking western civilization and mobilizing it against all Islamic movements. In that single act, al-Qaeqa achieved the unimaginable of bringing America to its knees (Cornwell, 2011), and instilling pure terror in the West. However, in the last 18 years' followers of al-Qaeda or its potential followers have not seen the movement committing any act comparable to 9/11. Therefore, while al-Qaeda succeeded in creating terror that reached the western political systems and has become a legacy, it did not follow up with the achievement, creating something of an anti-climax. In the aftermath of 9/11, a generation has grown up in the fear it generated, known as millennials,[7] who live in a more globalized, advanced, and accessible period than previous generations of followers due to the advancement of the internet age and online social networks.

When ISIS emerged, they assumed the position of influence that al-Qaeda had left vacant, building on the memories of fear al-Qaeda created, and utilizing the advanced platforms and technology available. ISIS linked itself to the same basic concepts that al-Qaeda believed in, such as *irja* and the Battle of Dabiq, framing them in a modern way, expanding upon the idea so that the coalition represented the Army of Rome, and their presence in Syria and Iraq became the stage for the Battle of Dabiq. Thus, ISIS do not only borrow technological tools of globalization, but they also borrowed the fear in the western civilization instilled nearly two decades previously by al-Qaeda. In this, the apocalypse became a postmodern concept for globalisation. Unlike Francis Fukuyama's theory of The End of History being due to neoliberalism and the end of human ideological development, ISIS presented the end of history as a post-globalisation battle between the caliphate state and the western coalition, or, the Battle of Dabiq.

Therefore, ISIS had a primed audience who both appreciated their technological advancements, and who also grew up in the post 9/11 era, personally experiencing its historical significance through a rise of literature, art, and media that represented the apocalypse or end of time concepts. Therefore, ISIS united a generation who were not satisfied with al-Qaeda, and a generation influenced by western fears of terror and apocalypse (Hindustan Times, 2017; John Walliss, 2011).

Further, in its method of selling agency and immediacy to recruits in the face of impending doom, ISIS has not shied away from attracting recruits by appealing to fantasies of violence, revenge, and sex, regardless of any proclaimed religious piety, filling a void of meaning carved in the lives of many by modern life, with globalization resulting in fractured identities, many seeking religious authority, and viewing modernity from the perspective of the past (Sasnal, 2016). Yet like the hectic contemporary society it seeks to contest, ISIS largely only succeeds in responding to the short-term needs of people. Cronin has compared ISIS with American culture in how its appeal relies on "a desire for power, agency and instant results" (Cronin, 2015).

Therefore, despite the two movements' current situations of being suspended ideologies, without territory or tangible form, seeming similar, the difference between them is in their reach and audience. Al-Qaeda appeals to a different membership than ISIS, which appeals to youth, selling sex, violence, and radical and immediate change.

Further, whether ISIS represents Islam or not, the essence of it is revealed in its ability to skillfully join the historical and the modern times, sometimes simultaneously, as seen with the beheading videos it circulates across social media. Moving easily in the global cyberspace, ISIS is clearly part of the globalization that touches all of us. It could be claimed that it differs from the continuum of global politics by its attempt to challenge the prevailing political order. Yet at the end of the day its means are not that different to the political order: ISIS happily endorses the usage of US dollars, and modern medicine, as well as modern war technology (Harari, 2016). Admittedly, it does occasionally show an obsession with medieval warfare in its propaganda videos, yet this can be countered as not much more than a certain kind of escapism, a phenomenon undeniably widespread in the postmodern culture of the West.

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77 Millennials is a term used to describe a generation. Pew Research Center describes the term as following: "Most Millennials were between the ages of 5 and 20 when the 9/11 terrorist attacks shook the nation, and many were old enough to comprehend the historical significance of that moment… Millennials also grew up in the shadow of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan" (Dimock, 2019)

Ultimately, ISIS sells instant gratification which radiates with today's youth, also known as millennials. The most immediate and encompassing example of this is seen with the call for 'vehicle ramming', which can be enacted by anyone at any time anywhere in the world on behalf of the movement and embodies the instant gratification that ISIS seeks to offer. Although al-Qaeda were the first to initiate the idea, it was ISIS followers committing the act worldwide that caused the phenomena to become associated with ISIS. While al-Qaeda, which takes protecting its brand seriously (Cronin, 2016), is remembered for its massive-scale terrorist attack in New York, ISIS is known for its smaller scale attacks that require little planning or expertise, are harder to anticipate by counter-terrorist forces, and are thus in many ways more successfully terroristic.

In keeping with al-Qaeda's allusion of being the experienced elder, traditional terrorists, Bin Laden had foreseen the destiny of ISIS. In "The Osama Bin Laden Files", The Combatting Terrorism Centre quotes Bin Laden saying, "we need to fight in areas where we can gain points in the caliphate based state, otherwise the enemies [US-led coalition] could easily destroy any state lacking from the essential foundation and to defend itself" (The Combatting Terrorism Centre, 2012, p. 146). Therefore Bin Laden warning against rushing to create a caliphate state, which is exactly what ISIS did.

Bin Laden continued by saying that "building a state without proper foundations is like building a house in the middle of torrential streams. Every time the water destroys the house, we rebuild and rebuild, until those helping with the rebuilding give up on us" (The Combatting Terrorism Centre, 2012, pp. 146-7). This is to say that if it a new state is not established on proper foundations then it will lose the attention and support of its followers. He continues to argues that "the impact of losing a state can be devastating, especially if that state is in its infancy" (The Combatting Terrorism Centre, 2012, p. 147). In this sense, Bin Laden foresaw ISIS's rise and fall. ISIS built its state, found opponents within its territory, and when they experienced the set-back of the coalition, it began to lose its own in-state supporters. This resulted in the remaining supporters, who still believed in the ideology and were willing to fight on ISIS's behalf, were those living outside of state territory.

Although al-Qaeda and ISIS appear to be in a similar suspended state of existence purely by ideology and belief, the two movements are different in their fundamental objectives. ISIS wants to build a state. If we see ISIS again, it will be another sudden burst of violence, and claiming of territory, as that is the promise they have made to their followers. It can be argued thus that ISIS is in a state of remission, rather than al-Qaeda which has taken a more passive position and is losing its popularity, credibility to create change, and is losing its believers to ISIS, whose credibility still exists from outside of Iraq and Syria.

7. Virtual Caliphate

Even though ISIS lost its territory, the fact that it managed to achieved statehood means that any future developments of the organisation will be geared towards reviving the project from where it ended, which would require building a new state outside of their last territory. The leaders, members, and sympathisers experienced the dream of establishing an Islamic state, and it is unlikely that they will forget this any time soon. Therefore, any future of ISIS relies on the organisation finding land for a new state outside of Mesopotamia, such as in Yemen or Sinai, where the conditions are similar to those of Iraq and Syria when ISIS first took root.

Based on a 2018 UN report, ISIS stopped issuing some of its electronic magazines which were part of its original propaganda, generating great popularity in the movement (United Nations Security Council, 2018, p. 2). However, the setback the movement has faced has actually made them rely even more on the virtual, online state. With every battle lost, and every failure ISIS experienced, members retreated to small cells that did not have control over any territory, making them more dangerous and threatening for the region and international society. Therefore, an increased reliance on social media and on an online presence for those cells and members to communicate ISIS's continued existence will be seen (Levitt, 2018), especially from those who were on the ground fighting, and experienced the setbacks personally.

The obstacles the movement therefore faces means that they will maintain their focus on a virtual caliphate to lead them to their goal of eventually achieving a state based on the success of their online propaganda (including Facebook,

Twitter, advertisements for killing, mini clips, broadcasting speeches etc) which made them influential online. So despite losing the territory, their online existence is still available and active. Therefore, they can build on their online existence to create a virtual caliphate, leading them to establishing an alternative state elsewhere.

8. Conclusion

In conclusion, the paper answered the question of *what makes ISIS exceptional* by employing sub-questions, starting with the question of how they established themselves. To answer this, the paper considered the US intervention in Iraq, where the seeds of the movement were planted by charismatic leaders such as Al Zarqawi and Al Baghdadi. The paper moved on to explore how ISIS built a pseudo state by considering the technical and tactical differences between al-Qaeda and ISIS. This section concludes that while ISIS is indeed a terrorist organization, it transcended al-Qaeda's legacy by creating citizenship, introducing taxation, and utilizing existing infrastructure.

Following the establishment and rise of ISIS, the paper asked why ISIS began to lose its footing in the Levant, linking this to the loss of loyalty of those under its ruling due to ISIS's inability to continue to maintain, protect, and provide for them. Therefore, the paper argued in this section that their loyalty was actually built on common interests between the people who suffered and are still suffering as a consequence of sectarianism and the US invasion.

The paper progressed to explore whether ISIS offered a resurgence of Islam, considering the concepts that ISIS holds at its core, such as the apocalypse, and how it borrowed the tools of globalization to recruit, establish itself, and attempt to reenact apocalyptic aspects of Islam on Iraqi and Syrian territory. Following this, the paper suggested that despite ISIS experiencing territorial setbacks, further comparison with al-Qaeda shows that ISIS retains its essence of agency and instant gratification with continued support globally via its online channels. This section particularly explored the attraction of ISIS among younger audiences who lived in the shadow of al-Qaeda's single and devastating terror attack on America, and how ISIS's encouragement to enact terror in everyday life, and escape into their virtual caliphate received world wide support, and not just with foot soldiers.

In seeking an answer to *what makes ISIS exceptional*, this paper extracted the essence of ISIS and its ability to adapt in a globalized world to fit in. Traditional terror organizations used western platforms as a means for spreading its ideology, interests, propaganda. However, ISIS took it to a new level, increasing the use of globalization's technology by increasing its funding to expand on the ground rather than just mobilizing attacks. They used technology to seduce believers, recruit, and even train them online. Therefore, despite Al Qaeda utilizing online communication to organize its attacks, ISIS was more up to date using platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube. ISIS produced aesthetically pleasing media which was professionally planned and executed in a Hollywood style, creating a virtuality and hyper realism to their brutality and violence which was most appealing to its audience (Steinbach, 2018).

ISIS embraced the changing times and developing technologies, meaning one of the most noticeable differences between the two was how they represented themselves. ISIS became the new, hot brand, leading al-Qaeda as classical and old-fashioned. The second main obvious difference between the two movements is that ISIS broke a tradition of hit-and-run. ISIS took root on the ground and expanded, pursuing building a state by occupying land, creating loyalty, hegemony, and citizenship over territories. ISIS appealed to this generation because it grew up in this fear, with the growing obsession with futility and apocalypse that is so commonly associated with millennials. In this context, ISIS provided a well branded, fresh look of Islam that appealed to these millennials.

People linked themselves to ISIS globally not because they were successful in Iraq, but because of how they represented their successes virtually through their branding. When your essence is virtual and has a strong allegiance, it can move easily between territories, and the movement will always be on the hunt for legitimacy which it considers as having a physical territory. Therefore, ISIS's setback might only be temporary, while it seeks a new territory for its caliphate. Thus, territorial setbacks or ending their presence on the ground will not end the ideology of ISIS, which has retreated to a virtual state. Because ISIS began virtually, regardless of the failure of their state, they still exist in a virtual setting.

Further, the leaders of ISIS were far less known than al-Qaeda's Bin Laden. ISIS's brand exists in its own right without having a face that can be destroyed, as seen with Bin Laden. When Bin Laden was killed, al-Qaeda lost part of their essence. However, ISIS's image comes from their virtual existence and flag, rather than something or someone that can be felled, and not having a physical representation makes ISIS almost invincible. The limitation of the paper starts from the academic research which followed the collapse of the movement, and evaluating the process of recruiting. Secondly, a limitation is that it is still ongoing, therefore coming to a full understanding of the subject cannot be fully reached.

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تفرد داعش: انجازات واخفاقات 2014/2018

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ملخص

تهدف هذه الورقة لتحليل وفهم الدوافع والمعتقدات التي دفعت البعض للانضمام لداعش اضافة لتحليل طبيعتها المتفردة من خلال الاجابة على تساؤل ما الذي يجعل هذا التنظيم استثنائي دون غيره من المنظمات المتشددة الإرهابية كما أن الورقة تقيم كيف استطاعت داعش الاستمرار بالرغم من الاخفاقات وانتهاء سيطرتها على الارض وذلك من خلال توظيف منهج الحالة الدراسية الذي يعتمد على تحليل الادبيات الرئيسية والثانوية المتعلقة بدراسة داعش والاختلافات بينها وبين المنظمات المتشددة الأخرى وخاصة داعش إضافة لذلك فإن الورقة تقوم بتحليل تاريخ المنظمات الارهابية الاخرى وذلك فيما يتعلق بالمتغيرات الجيوسياسية وعلاقة داعش العميقة مع هذه المنظمات.

توصلت هذه الدراسة إلى نتيجة مفادها بأنه نتيجة لطبيعتها الايديولوجية وفكرها المتطرف إضافة لعلاقتها الافتراضية مع مؤيديها على مستوى العالم فإنه من الممكن أن تستمر داعش واعادة انتاج نفسها بشكل اخر بالرغم من مفقدانها الخلافة والسيطرة الجغرافية.

الكلمات الدالة: تنظيم داعش،العولمة، مواقع التواصل الاجتماعي ، الارهاب