

THE ISLAMIC STATE, LEGITIMACY AND THE
INSTITUTION OF CALIPHATE

A REFLECTION ON THE THEOLOGICAL AND POLITICAL
LEGITIMACY OF THE JIHADIST GROUP

by Romain Jaquier

Submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of
Bachelor of Arts
in
Politics and International Relations

University College Dublin

School of Politics and International Relations - SPIRE

April 2015

Table of contents

Introduction	2
Profiling the Islamic State	4
The caliphate: how the Islamic State monopolizes an institution	6
The caliphate in the Qur'ān and Islamic history.....	6
The caliphate mobilized by the Islamic State	9
Political perspectives on the caliphate.....	12
One caliphate to rule them all?	13
The IS: political organization or militant movement?	14
Conclusion.....	15
<i>Acknowledgments</i>	15
Annexes	16
References	17



Introduction

Considered as the “world’s richest terrorist organization” (Moore 2014), perpetrator of an extreme and highly-mediatized violence, the organisation that calls itself the “Islamic State” (IS)¹ disconcerts and perturbs both public opinion and world leaders. A jihadist movement that proclaims a return to what its leaders consider to be traditional forms of Islam as laws of mankind, the Islamic State is a complex actor on the Middle East stage, which became even more complex in mid-2014. On June 29 2014, the organization released a press statement entitled “The promise of Allāh” in which they declared the “establishment of the Islamic *khilāfah*” (Islamic State 2014; 5)². Even though this declaration is only words and has “very few capacities to change the balance of power on the field”* (Dupret 2014), the announcement has been highly mediatized and has driven numerous reactions worldwide. A caliphate (*khilāfah*) is a form of Islamic government led by a caliph, who is considered as the successor of the prophet Muhammad and theoretically the leader of all Muslims in the world. Although the large-scale reactions to the announcement were clear and sound, the legitimacy attached to the concept of Islamic caliphate is rather vague. In this work, I would like to approach the IS in regard of its declaration of a caliphate, and its importance within its strategy.

My work is articulated around the following question: “Why has the IS proclaimed an Islamic caliphate on Iraq and Syria and how best should it be understood?” On the one hand, the research does not pretend to present the exact incentives of IS leaders, but to present a reflexive insight on the nature of the organization as a political actor in the Middle East. On the other hand, the research shall not aim at giving a complete picture of the IS’ propaganda strategy but to place one of its key element – the declaration of a caliphate – in a theoretical and geopolitical context.

The question is relevant for several reasons. First, the IS has proved to be, until now, a relative long lasting movement that has great significance for a large number of near and distant actors (states, individuals, ethnic groups), mainly in the Middle East, but also in other regions of the world. Second, the beliefs and norms carried by this organizations matter for

¹ **Note on nomenclature.** In this work, I consciously use the different terms that the organization calls itself, depending on the time period in which I am considering it. Far from being neutral, the name “Islamic State” is however at the centre of the discussions in this work, and I consider not using it for political or ideological reasons as a bias.

² Regarding the references to the statement of the IS, I numbered the pages of the document according to the pages of the PDF document provided on the link in the bibliography.

* All quotations indicated with an asterisk - “*” - are translations made by the author.

numerous religious and political groups. Finally, as it is presented in this work, some features of the IS are relatively new and unexpected and therefore deserve a careful attention.

The high mediatisation of the IS and its actions led to high number of analyses, debates and controversies on some key features of the organisation. In September 2014, the French government, through the input of Laurent Fabius, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, started to use the word *Daesh* instead of *Islamic State*, to refer to the organisation. The word – which is actually the Arabic acronym of “*ad-Dawlah al-Islāmiyah fil-‘Irāq wash-Shām*”; Islamic State in Iraq and Sham (ISIS) – is expressly preferred by the French government, followed by journalists and most of media actors, to clearly differentiate ISIS from both Islam and any form of legitimate state (Annaix 2014). The debate grew worldwide, especially in the U.S when President Barack Obama stated in a speech that “ISIL [Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant] is not Islamic and [...] certainly not a State” (CNN News 2014). In this context, the article by Graeme Wood published by the Atlantic in March 2015 came as a bombshell as it clearly stated that “the Islamic State is Islamic. *Very Islamic*” (Wood 2015). Thus, categorizing the IS has become a political struggle, given that accepting some of its feature – even its name – seems to intrinsically imply the legitimization of what it is claiming itself: being a legitimate Islamic state. A number of reactions – some from Islamic organisations – have been expressed against the article to qualify the categorization as Islamic. They mainly highlight that interpretation is a central part of Islam, which Wood got wrong (Rachid 2015), or that religion is not the best framework to set the discussion on the IS (Berger 2015). The appropriation of Islam by the IS is also refuted by Shadi Hamid (2015) and Jack Jenkins (2015) as the latter argues that “just because a group can appropriate Islamic sources and Islamic symbols [...] doesn’t mean that they get to be the ones who define for the world what Islam means”.

In such debates, the return to a theoretical background to have a deep understanding of the IS as a political actor is essential. A reflection around the concept of caliphate, within Islamic political thought and Islamic historiography, as suggested by the work of Baudoin Dupret (2014) and Afzal Ashraf (2014), is relevant in this context. On the one hand, Dupret (2014) argues that the declaration of a caliphate is usurped and, on the other hand, according to Ashraf (2014), Islamic unity under the same political organization has no basis in history and was constructed as a myth, since the collapse of the Ottoman Empire in 1924. Therefore, my hypothesis is the following:

- The caliphate declared by the IS has no foundation in Islamic political thought and no correspondence with any form of caliphate throughout Islamic history.

Moreover, the question of the legitimacy of the IS as a state is also a large debate. Even though the recognition as a legitimate member of the international state-based system is refuted by most of the governments and analysts, some of them recognise that some IS' features could make this organisation a proto-state: "courts, a tax system, and security and social services" (Haykel and Bunzel 2014). Based on an approach suggested by Tanisha M. Fazal (2015) and Peter Harling (2015), I discuss those elements, in a second part, and the political implications of the declaration of the caliphate.

The first part of this work will present some historic facts and global insight of the IS as a jihadist movement. Second, I will mobilize some elements of Islamic political thought and historiography to better understand the concept of caliphate and how the IS' caliphate has very few theoretical and historical foundations. Third, I analyse some features of the IS as a political actor on the regional and international stage to show that they are part of a traditional perspective of human governance and that the IS has no intention to match with and be included within a state-based international order.

Profiling the Islamic State

The IS is one of many jihadist organisations active in the Middle East. Its origins could be dated back to the late 1990s when Abū Mus'ab al-Zarqāwī, an Islamist activist from Jordan, set up a jihadist training camp in association with al-Qa'eda. Al-Zarqāwī had left Jordan in the late 1980s and joined the jihad against the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan (Bunzel 2015; 13). Fleeing from Afghanistan after the U.S. invasion in 2001, al-Zarqāwī headed a jihadist group in Iraq that became known under the name of *Jama'at al-Tawhid wal'-Jihad* ("the Group of God's Unity and Jihad") (Bunzel 2015; 14). Al-Zarqāwī's ideology, one of the main foundational elements of current IS strategy, was considered as extreme, even for a group such as al-Qa'eda – with which the IS gradually parted. Considering the Sh'ite community as a greater threat than the Western powers, al-Zarqāwī had a highly polarized perspective on his political fight: those who were not with him on one side and those who were against him on the other. Between 2002 and 2006, his group developed itself in Northern Iraq, becoming the branch of al-Qa'eda in Iraq (AQI). In early 2006, the group merged with 5 other jihadist organizations, approaching the structure wanted by al-Zarqāwī. However, the latter was killed in an airstrike in June 2006. In October 2006,

the leaders of AQI declared the establishment of “the Islamic State of Iraq (ISI)”. But the group’s leaders, Abū ‘Umar al-Baghdādī and Abū Hamza al-Muhajir as his deputy, were not very efficient and the organization has had very limited political relevance and legitimacy until the death of its two leaders in April 2010 (Bunzel 2015). One month later, Abū Bakr al-Baghdādī was elected as the new leader of the organization. Sharing the same beliefs as al-Zarqāwī, al-Baghdādī revitalized ISI and, taking advantage of the chaos in Syria, set up a branch of ISI through the inception of Jabhat al-Nusrah. Though the allegiance of the latter to ISI was denied by its leader, a large number of fighters joined al-Baghdādī, leading to the inception of “the Islamic State in Iraq and Sham” in April 2013. “After six years and a half of contraction, the Islamic State was back on the path of expansion” (Bunzel 2015; 25). From May 2013, the ISIS increased its control in Syria and especially on the town of Raqqa – which would become its main stronghold in Syria (Fritel 2015). The organisation became well known of the public in June 2014 when they conquered Mosul and most of the country’s Sunni territories. On June 29, Abū Muhammad al-‘Adnani – chief spokesman of the ISIS – official declared on radio the establishment of the caliphate and that the organisation should be known as the “Islamic State” and no longer as the “Islamic State in Iraq and Sham”. In parallel, the IS released a press statement, translated in 5 different languages (The Islamic State 2014). Five days later, al-Baghdādī delivered his first speech as a declared caliph in the great mosque of the newly conquered Mosul.

The IS distances itself from other jihadist and terrorist³ groups because of three main groups of reasons: a substantial and very varied financial portfolio (al-‘Ubaydi *et al.* 2014), its control, until now, over large portions of the Iraqi and Syrian populations and a very active and efficient propaganda apparatus that spread both an extreme violence and ideology. First, the IS can count on various sources of income as the exploitation of oil and other natural resources, agriculture, ransoms and donations. Moreover, the IS raises taxes in the regions it controls in Iraq and Syria. Those incomes – which would reach US\$ hundreds of millions - secure a substantial wealth for the IS, whose “profile and the power of this group are a first in the history of contemporary terrorism” (Brisard and Martinez 2014). Second, the IS successfully claims the control on large urban areas in Northern Iraq (the town of Mosul, North al-Anbar and Salah al-Din governorates) and Syria (the town of Raqqa and Aleppo governorate)⁴. Under its controls, there are also dams, main roads, border crossings and

³ I try to avoid the term “terrorist group” to define the IS because I consider terrorism to be a method, which is used among many others, by the IS.

⁴ See annex 1 for more detail.

strategic communication routes. The IS has therefore between six and seven million people under its control throughout Iraq and Syria (Gartenstein-Ross 2015). Finally, the IS, through its Al-Hayat Media Center, is capable of very broadly diffusing its extreme and brutal tactics, that include mass killings, beheadings, immolations and other atrocities. In very high quality and elaborate videos – careful staging, sound and music, the IS broadcasts, in an unprecedented and extremely crude manner, violent acts that profoundly shock public opinion worldwide.

The caliphate: how the Islamic State monopolizes an institution

The caliphate in the Qur’ān and Islamic history

Discussing the issue of the caliphate is discussing the question of the exercise of power in Islam, and especially the question of succession. When the group Islamic State in Iraq and Sham (ISIS), led by Abū Bakr al-Baghdādī, declared the reestablishment of the caliphate on the territories it controls and its renaming to “Islamic State” in June 2014, most Western medias presented it as the revival of an ancient – almost mythical - institution, that was dormant since the collapse of the Ottoman Empire in 1924 (see for example L’Obs 2014; Le Figaro 2014 or Withnall 2014 for The Independent). But what exactly is this institution? Understanding the concept of caliphate as an institution implies understanding its foundations in the Qur’ān, how it has been understood by the first Muslims and how it has been theorized and recuperated in the development of Islamic political thought.

Without going into too much theological detail – which are not, as we are going to see, the main focus of IS leaders – the concept of caliphate has to be replaced within its foundational context. The first step is to get back to the roots of the word. The Arabic term *khalīfah* – which has “a rich and varied semantic development” (Watt 1968; 32) - has the generally accepted meaning of “successor”, as the “one who takes the place of another after him in some matter” (Watt 1968; 32). It occurs in the Qur’ān several times – under its singular and plural forms – but do not refer to any form of political succession. Indeed, according to most commentators, the meaning of the word in the Qur’ān refers more to a concept of peoples and tribes; successive generations of mankind that Allāh put on Earth (Watt 1968; Paret 1970). Lamrabet (2010) clarifies this perspective by arguing that the *khalīfah* is the human race, that Allāh blessed by granting it the management of His Inception. “If the human beings are *khalīfah*, they are not in its literal meaning – representatives of Allāh on Earth – but the depositories of His noble Mission whose the Creator assigned them”*

(Lamrabet 2010) There is no direct and explicit reference to any form of representation or delegation of power, but only of human generations. The institution of caliphate has therefore no direct root in the Qur'ān.

However, the most important perspective is not how the term is best conceptualized within the Holy Texts but how it has been interpreted by the first followers of the Prophet Muhammad during the early Islamic era, in the 7th century. When Muhammad died in 632, neither his teachings nor the Qur'ān clearly stated the process to appoint its successor, even though “it was assumed [...] that someone has to succeed him as Imam (Leader) [after his death]” (Black 2001). Three Imam were successively elected: Abū-Bakr (r. 632-4), 'Umar (r. 634-46) and 'Uthmān (r. 646-56). All three were chosen from Muhammad's tribe, the Quraysh – the first by Muhammad's companions and the two latter by a council of notables (Black 2001). According to Watt (1968), a Meccan leader (that is, from the Quraysh tribe) was considered as a necessary condition to ensure the unity of the *Ummah*⁵. During 'Uthmān's reign, tribal dissensions appeared among the *Ummah*. After 'Uthmān died and 'Alī – a cousin of the Prophet – took his place as Imam, the *Ummah* divided itself and endured a civil war. Ali and its supporters were defeated and Ali assassinated in 661, leading to the establishment of Ummayyad dynasty (Esposito 1984).

During this period of the four first Imam, as it is highlighted by Watt (1968) and Miquel (1982), the title of *khalīfah rasūl Allāh* (the caliph of the Messenger of God) – mainly attached to Abū-Bakr – had a secular origin and its power did not stem from the Qur'ān. Indeed, except for the leading of public prayers, Abū-Bakr did not deputize for Muhammad. The title of *khalīfah* slowly institutionalized itself as designating the Imam of the Community through repeated practices and customs. Indeed, both authors emphasize that the prime mover of the decision was the cohesion and unity of the *Ummah*. The election of the four first successors of Muhammad were therefore based on a social and political need – the need of having someone leading the *Ummah*. It is important to raise that the Qur'ān was essential, even though it is not the direct foundation of the caliphate, as the central inspiration and guide of the first Muslims. They considered at that moment that the social and political organization they were setting up was a legitimate one, regarding the teachings of the Holy Texts.

However, during the Ummayyad era (661-750) – whose first ruler was Mu'awiya I and was from the Quraysh tribe, the caliphs of the new empire – whose capital was established in Damascus – started to “place a new interpretation on the word in order to exalt their office”

⁵ An Arabic term to refer to the whole community of Muslims.

(Watt 1968; 33). The process of institutionalization continued. They considered themselves as appointed by Allāh and built their theory by quoting the Qu'rān. One of the main verse which was mobilized was *Sūrah* 2:30: “And (remember) when your Lord said to the angels: “Verily, I am going to place (mankind) generations after generations [*khalīfa*] on earth” [...]”⁶. The concept attached to the initial word was therefore re-appropriated and justified by an adapted approach of the Qur'ān to legitimize a form of political organization (Watt 1968).

In 750 however, after 30 years of growing instability, the Umayyad dynasty felt replaced by the 'Abbāsīd caliphate (750-1258) – whose rulers were also from the Quraysh tribe. Throughout this empire – at least until the early 11th century, the Islamic civilization flourished, politically and culturally. It is considered as the “Golden Age” of Islam (Esposito 1984). During this dynasty, the institution of caliphate strengthened itself, again to legitimize the power exercised by the successive caliphs, who enjoyed an absolute power, both political and religious. Moreover, the institution, which had hardly been theorized previously, became the subject of several Islamic scholars's works, among whom al-Māwardī's *Al-ahkām as-sultāniyya* (“the Ordinances of Government”) is the most recognized. As highlighted by Esposito (1984; 30), those theorizations were closer to the “delineation of a moral ideal” than the “draft of government regulations or guidelines”. Indeed, from the 11th century, the empire were slowly collapsing. In his work, written between 1045 and 1058, al-Māwardī presented the ideal features of the caliphate as a political and religious institution. Among others, he defined the seven condition of the Imamate (Leadership) – that is, to become caliph – and one of which is being a member of the Quraysh tribe. The informal rule thus became a written institutional condition.

From 1258 and the fall of Baghdad – and thus of the 'Abbāsīd caliphate, invaded by the Mongols – the caliphate as an institution that had been quite successful in ensuring the unity of the whole *Ummah* since the early Islamic era disappeared and was replaced by several sultanates. The title of caliph had lost most of its signification. Only the Mamlūk sultan of Egypt, Baybars, saw an opportunity to legitimize his rule and installed a member of the 'Abbāsīd family as a caliph in Cairo (Watt 1968; 108). After the Ottoman invasion of Egypt in 1517, the current caliph was shortly taken to Constantinople by the invaders, but its influence was null. He died in 1543 without any successor. Only 200 years later – probably after 1750, the Ottoman sultans claimed that the last caliph had transferred the legitimacy attached to the caliphate to them. According to most historians and commentators, this was a

⁶ All quotes from the Qu'rān are excerpted from the English translation by Dr. Muhammad Taqī-ud-Dīn al-Hilālī and Dr. Muhammad Mushin Khān.

fiction and the monopolization of the caliphate by the Ottomans rulers was only a strategic move (Watt 1968; Enayat 1982). Since then, however, the institution regained “some recognition from Muslims throughout the world [...] due to the fact that the Ottoman sultan had become by far the most powerful Muslim sovereign” (Watt 1968; 109). In 1924, after the defeat of World War I and the pressure of secularization, the Ottoman caliphate was abolished.

The caliphate is thus a body of political and social institutions; constructed, modified and theorized by Muslims leaders and scholars. Like any form of arrangements of power and of leadership of a society, its legitimation stems from the people’s acceptance of the relationship of domination (see Weber 1921). But it would be flawed to clearly divide the religious approach to the social and political aspects. As Black (2001; 13) highlights, the very concept of *Islam* is the fusion between “religion and government, sacred and secular”. One cannot separate one from the other. The concept of caliphate, rooted in the beliefs of the first Muslims, has been gradually adapted to the circumstances imposed by the course of events and constructed around the community, to ensure its unity and cohesion. The concept of an ideal caliphate – a unique power, stemming from Allāh, owned by the community and represented by the caliph, even when suffering from the vicissitudes of History, maintained and adapted itself unregularly, under one form or the other of legitimized governmental institutions (Miquel 1982).

The caliphate mobilized by the Islamic State

The question is then how is the caliphate mobilized by the IS, regarding the elements just explored? The analysis of the statement “This is the promise of Allāh” – released by the IS propaganda apparatus on June 29 2014 in five different languages (Arabic along with four translations) – allows us to paint a broad picture of the IS’ use of the concept of caliphate. The categories of recipients targeted by this message – at least the English version – are quite easily identifiable. As every single Islamic concept is translated or explained, we can figure out that the objective is to make their assertions understandable even by non-Muslim or individuals not accustomed to Islam. But more importantly, I argue that the main targets of the IS scholars are all Muslims who are already aware of, or involved in, a form of Islamic radicalism and who are, in a way or another, stuck in a situation of inferiority or humiliation. The whole argumentation is based on the reference to the Arabs before Islam – who were “in

the depths of ignorance and blinding darkness” (The Islamic State 2014; 2) – and to whom the Revelation gave a tremendous power. This power allowed them to defeat their enemy, even in a situation of high inferiority. In an audacious way, the text compares the Revelation, through which Allāh “unified [the Muslims], united their rank” and which made the first believers unbelievably stronger, to what the IS offers through the re-establishment of the caliphate. Their goal is then to convince more Muslims to join their movement. Thus, the caliphate is the cornerstone of their argumentation. I analyse the question in regard with two different perspectives: the caliphate as a fixed and timeless institution and the caliphate as the unique legitimate community.

Firstly, IS scholars clearly present the caliphate as a strong and unambiguous institution. Indeed, they first explain that the caliphate directly stems from the Qur’ān. They state *Sūrah* 2:30 to justify it: “Allāh (the Exalted) said, {And mention when your Lord said to the angels, “Indeed, I will make upon the earth a *khalīfah*”}” (The Islamic State 2014; 4). As we have seen previously, the implicit meaning has nothing to do with a form of political organisation and is therefore consciously misused by the IS to justify their declaration. Indeed, the translation by Dr. al-Hilālī and Dr. Khān (1977) mentions “(mankind) generations after generations” instead of *khalīfah*⁷. Moreover, it is interesting to note that, according to Watt (1968), the same *Sūrah* has been used by the first Umayyad caliphs to justify their rule.

Second, as it has been explained at length, the institutions corresponding to the caliphate were transformed throughout the centuries. From the first four traditional and “ideal” caliphates, the institution completely changed until it was re-mobilized by the Ottoman Empire in the 18th century. But the statement (The Islamic State 2014; 4-5) emphasizes this perspective several times by repeating the *khilāfah*, using the determiner *the*: “It is the *khilāfah* [...]. It is the *khilāfah*”, “[i]ndeed, it is the State. Indeed, it is the *khilāfah*” on the next page or “[i]t is the State – the state for the Muslims” a few lines later. Therefore, the single institution that the IS statement refers to as an almost mythical single institution does not actually exist nor existed.

⁷ Others translations of the Qur’an present a literal translation for *khalīfah* as a vice-regent (Ali 1934), viceroy (Pickthall 1930) or successive authority (Saheeh International 2010). Commentators and analysts are however almost unanimous, as it has been presented previously.

Third, the IS statement refers to some “essentials necessary for *khilāfah*” (The Islamic State 2014; 4) and the fact that “*khālīfah* Ibrāhīm [...] has fulfilled the conditions for [establishing the] *khilāfah* [...]”. As explained before, the mentioned conditions and essentials were completely constructed through uses and customs, associated with theories of the institution constructed by scholars. The unilateral declaration of a caliphate is barely justifiable on those legal and objective conditions presented as such.

Secondly, this statement’s approach of IS’ caliphate strongly refers to it as the only legitimate Muslims community. First, the uniqueness of the first Islamic communities - successively under the first four caliphs and both the Umayyad and ‘Abbāsīd dynasties – is mobilized to legitimize their caliphate and delegitimize any other form of social Muslim organization – especially other jihadist groups; “after the consolidation and the establishment of the *khilāfah*, the legality of your groups and organizations has become invalid” (The Islamic State 2014; 6). But the situation is completely different in the early 21st century than between the 7th and 10th centuries. As we have seen previously, the legitimacy that was accorded to the caliphate as a form of government rooted in its social construction by the leaders and consciously recognized by the people under its rule. On the one hand, there is very little recognition of the IS’ caliphate among the Muslim community – except other Salafist militant groups such as Boko Haram (Alkhshali and Almasry 2015), which represent only a very tiny proportion of Muslims throughout the world. On the other hand, the IS is not the only group that has declared a caliphate since the collapse of the Ottoman Empire. The Ahmadiyya Muslim Community, created in India in the late 19th century, also claims to be led by a caliph, His Holiness Hadhrat Mirza Masroor Ahmad (Ahmadiyya Muslim Community 2015). The Ahmadiyya Muslim Community claims a “membership exceeding tens of millions” and their leader has been received by U.S. Senators on Capitol Hill and the European Parliament in Brussels in 2012, which confirm that to some extent it is considered as a very legitimate organization. Even though the legitimacy of this organization will not be discussed here, the simple fact that another strong group also claims to be led by a caliph strongly undermines IS claim to uniqueness as the legitimate caliphate.

Second, the statement refers to a certain form of religious obligation to establish a caliphate, when conditions are met. Indeed, they state that “[i]t is the *khīlafah* – the abandoned obligation of the era”, “[the *khīlafah*], which the Muslims are sinful for if they do not try to establish” because the “Islamic State has no *shar’ī* (legal) constraints or excuse that

can justify delaying or neglecting the establishment of the *khīlafah* [...]” (The Islamic State 2014; 4). Such an obligation appears nowhere in the Holy Texts or in Islamic political theory. It is simply used as an argument to legitimize – without any base – a so-called divine necessity of the caliphate.

Thus, the IS appeals to the caliphate as a symbol of Islam's golden era and political and cultural very strong influence. As highlighted by Miquel (1982), the ideal represented by the early Islamic community, closely knit around the Prophet and its direct successors and which maintained itself despite all, is an extremely efficient representation of Islam. Indeed, as we have understood, the caliphate, throughout its centuries of existence, has had great significance for a lot of Muslims. But we can clearly see here that the IS mobilizes the caliphate as a form of traditional government, without the social consensus that rooted its legitimacy. It is a form of nostalgic hijacking of the institution that might be likened to the concept of “folklorization”, which is mainly related to religious practices. In his sociological thought, French scholar Michel de Certeau defines this concept as the new status of traditional concepts and symbols, cut from their community and social meanings in which they were constructed and pulled out from the constraints of an authorized memory (Mary 1995). The caliphate, as mobilized by the IS, has become a symbol of this revival of traditional concepts, in which we can very clearly distinguish the “*integral* or literal connection to the Scriptures which characterizes Islamic and Jewish fundamentalist movements”* (Mary 1995; 130-1).

Political perspectives on the caliphate

As we have seen in the previous section, the caliphate is closer to a nostalgic reference to an ancient institution – with the instrumental purpose of touching the spirit and the heart of potential new supporters – than the establishment of a recognized political structure. However, the declaration of the caliphate by the IS has had some important consequences, which I tackle in this part.

Discussing the IS as a political actor is delicate, because according to the approach that is used, the implications – regarding theorizing but also policy making – are completely different. For example, an approach discussing the IS as a state in the Western conception – or trying to become a state – refers to principles of international law principles and conditions to be a state within the international system. Both have foundations in the construction and

institutionalization of the “nation-state” since the Peace of Westphalia in 1648. For example, this approach is used by Shany *et al.* (2014) among others, as they compare the political features of the IS to the conditions or rules to be a state in the current international system. The approach mobilized in this work is slightly different. Following the conclusions reached in the previous part, the analysis of the IS as a political actor and based on the concept of caliphate cannot – and should not – be a state-based approach. Indeed, in this context, asking the question of the IS as a state or not is a highly ethnocentric approach of human governance. Moreover, it completely closes any form of analyses that are not included in the conventional definition of state. Therefore, starting from the reflection on the caliphate, I tackle the question under two different angles. First, I discuss how the caliphate allowed the IS to position itself among jihadist groups. Second, I present how the institution of caliphate is integrated in what I identify as two main goals of the IS.

One caliphate to rule them all?

The caliphate is not only mobilized by the IS, on the jihadist international scene. As it is explained in length by Bunzel (2015) and al-‘Ubaydi (2014), the establishment of the caliphate has been discussed between al-Zarqāwī and Ayman al-Zawahīrī, current leader of al-Qa’eda (AQ), in their correspondence in early 2000s. Moreover, Bunzel (2015) highlights that the reestablishment of the caliphate had been frequently mentioned by Osama Bin-Laden. Indeed, the institution of caliphate particularly resonates in the Salafist jihadist groups, which consider themselves as the only true Muslims (Bunzel 2015). However, IS and AQ’s perspectives strongly differs on the strategies to implement the caliphate. AQ has a long-term strategy as and their governance and territorial incentives are less strong than the IS. The latter, by defending a short-term strategy, and establishing the caliphate without consulting AQ leadership, strongly positioned themselves on the jihadist scene, mainly toward potential followers, who saw an increased legitimacy in their organization. Zelin (2014) highlights that the caliphate “[...] is quite appealing to jihadists. ISIS is not only talking the talk about establishing an Islamic state, it is walking the walk”. More recently, the IS and the Taliban declared a mutual jihad against each other. This clearly show how the IS’ extreme strategy, among which the declaration of the caliphate imposes a strong-perceived legitimacy, gave a very clear and unambiguous identity to the IS, that placed it in the foreground on the race for global jihad.

The IS: political organization or militant movement?

The analysis of the declaration of the caliphate also have relevance to categorize the IS. As mentioned before, it is extremely important to see beyond the Western scheme of thought incorporated in the concept of “state” and to comprehend the IS political authority as a traditional form of governance. First, the IS strongly and expressly despises any form of modern political organization. On the one hand, it strongly rejects the current map of the Middle East. Abū Hamza al-Muhajir, leader of the Islamic State in Iraq, declared in 2006: “We are not the sons of Sykes-Picot. We are the sons of the Prophet Muhammad” (in Bunzel 2015; 18). The current borders between states in the region have absolutely no meaning in their ideology and the destruction of the border between Iraq and Syria proves it (see their action in Vice News 2014). On the other hand, faithful to the Salafist ideology, the IS also rejects any form of nationalism and democratic governance (The Islamic State 2014; 5-6). Indeed, democrats “err in assigning “partners” to God in legislation, deemed the prerogative of the Divine Legislator” (Bunzel 2015). The objective of the IS is clearly to implement a form of traditional governance that is rooted in the Qur’ān and Muhammad’s teachings, which expresses itself, among others, through the institution of caliphate. It is a central element to have a better understanding of IS ideology but also the geopolitical situation in the Middle East. However, an amalgam is occurring between features of IS’ caliphate and Western conceptions of the state. Indeed, some of their features could be considered as similar, but are not. Any form of social and political organization of a society – appointing leaders, creating structures dividing responsibilities – does not necessarily refer to a “state”. Taxes, for example, which are foundational features of the “nation-state”, do not have the same source at all, as the taxes slapped by the IS (*zakāt*: obligatory alms, *jizya*: tax imposed on non-Muslims) have a religious foundations in the Qur’ān (*zakāt* in 7:156 among others, and *jizyah* in 9:29). As for the taxes that would be imposed on border crossing to truck drivers, it looks more like criminal extortion than an institutionalized tax (Reed 2015).

The IS is therefore clearly not trying to be a state or to be included in the state-based international system, which it hates so much. As suggested by Fazal (2015), the IS should not be understood as a secessionist movement, which would “seek the benefits of statehood” but more as a form of revolutionary and fundamentalist religious movement, whose claimed goals were reasonably successful during the past years. Thus, the IS’ caliphate poses a tremendous challenge to both the state-based international system and the ability – and wish - of the West to understand a contradictory perspective on power. A further questioning would be here to

know to what extent the implementation of such a form of traditional political governance is possible and sustainable within the current international system.

Conclusion

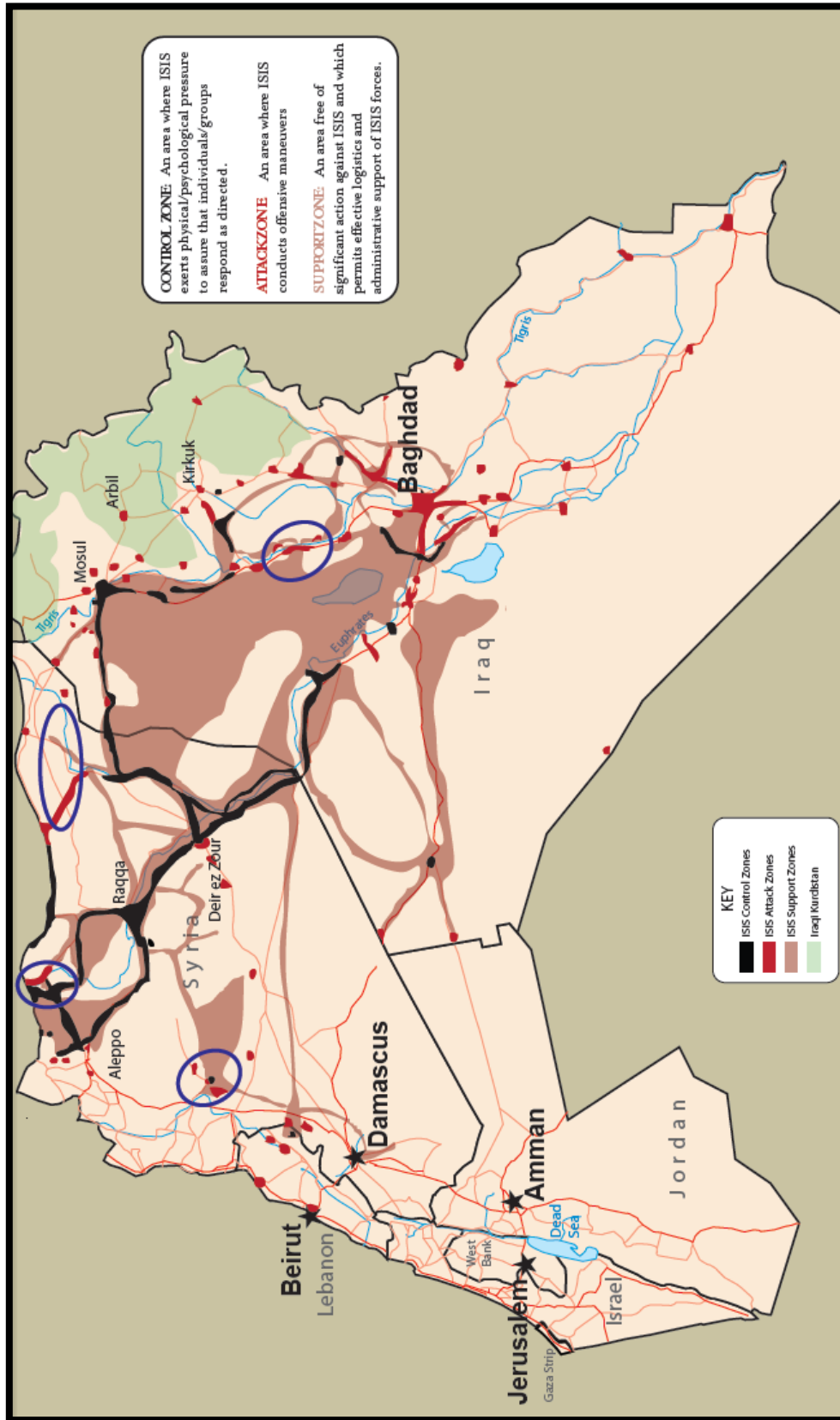
Is the Islamic State Islamic or not? This question is tackled in numerous works on the IS and jihadist groups, and the answers – whatever they are - have extremely heavy implications. Indeed, the underpinning question is “What is the IS?”, and eventually what the possible policies to struggle against it are. The contribution of this paper among this broad and delicate debate is a reflection on the institution of caliphate, which leads to two main conclusions. First, the caliphate, as mobilized by the IS is very far from being rooted in the Qur’ān and from the caliphates through Islamic history. It is a “folklorized” mobilization of this political institution, which has been socially and politically constructed and has taken several forms since the 8th century. Second, the IS does not try to build a state in its Western conception but a traditional form of political governance, which they claim to be rooted in the Qur’ān and for which the caliphate is the symbol. They also claim to be the only legitimate Muslim *Ummah*. However, the legitimation of the IS does not depend on sound foundations in Islamic thought and history but on how Muslims could understand and being convinced – and some are indeed - by those arguments. Understanding this point is extremely important to avoid going on the very dangerous path of the conception of those events as a war of the West against Islam, as some commentators have insinuated in their analyses (among others Cohen 2015). The religious issue is here very important in order to get a better understand of this jihadist group, but replacing the IS in a social and political context is the cornerstone of a productive reflection on the current situation in the Middle East.

Acknowledgments

The author would like to warmly thank Dr. Vincent Durac for his careful supervision and helpful support.

Annexes

Annex 1: ISIS sanctuary (April 2015)



Annexe 1: Territories influences of the IS in Syria and Iraq. State: April 2015 (Source: Institute for the Study of War).

References

- Ahmadiyya Muslim Community (2015). *Ahmadiyya Muslim Community*. Available at: <http://www.alislam.org>. [Accessed 20 April 2015].
- al-Hilālī, M. T. and Khān, M. M. (1977). *Translation of the meanings of the Noble Qur'ān in the English language*, Madinah: King Fahd complex for the printing of the Holy Qur'ān.
- Alkhshali, H. and Almasy, S. (2015). "ISIS leader purportedly accepts Boko Haram's pledge of allegiance", *CNN News*, 13 March. Available at: <http://edition.cnn.com/2015/03/12/middleeast/isis-boko-haram/>. [Accessed 20 April 2015].
- Ali, A. Y. (1934). *The Holy Qur-ān: English Translation & Commentary (With Arabic Text)*, Lahore: Shaik Muhammad Ashraf.
- al-'Ubaydi, M., Lahoud, N., Milton, D. and Price, B. (2014). "The Group That Calls Itself a State: Understanding the Evolution and Challenges of the Islamic State", *The Combating Terrorism Center at West Point*, December. Available at: <https://www.ctc.usma.edu/v2/wp-content/uploads/2014/12/CTC-The-Group-That-Calls-Itself-A-State-December20141.pdf>. [Accessed 25 February 2015].
- Annaix, A (2014). « « Daesh » plutôt que « l'état islamique », le gouvernement s'est passé le mot », *Huffington Post*, 15 September. Available at: http://www.huffingtonpost.fr/2014/09/15/video-daesh-etat-islamique_n_5821414.html. [Accessed 16 April 2015].
- Ashraf, A. (2014). "The myth of the caliphate and the Islamic State", *Al-Jazeera*, 10 July. Available at: <http://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/opinion/2014/07/myth-caliphate-islamic-state-20147912425476113.html>. [Accessed 22 February 2015].
- Berger, J. M. (2015). "Enough about Islam: Why religion is not the most useful way to understand ISIS", *Brookings*, 18 February. Available at: <http://www.brookings.edu/blogs/order-from-chaos/posts/2015/02/18-enough-about-islam-berger>. [Accessed 15 April 2015].
- Bunzel, C. (2015). "From Paper State to Caliphate: the Ideology of the Islamic State", Center for Middle East Policy at Brookings, 19 March. Available at: <http://www.brookings.edu/~media/research/files/papers/2015/03/ideology-of-islamic-state-bunzel/the-ideology-of-the-islamic-state.pdf>. [Accessed 15 April 2015].
- Brisard, J-C. and Martinez, D. (2014). "Islamic State: the economy-based terrorist funding", *Thomson Reuters*, October. Available at: <http://accelus.thomsonreuters.com/sites/default/files/GRC01815.pdf>. [Accessed 17 April 2015].
- CNN News (2014). "Transcript: President Obama's Speech on Combating ISIS and Terrorism", 10 September. Available at: <http://edition.cnn.com/2014/09/10/politics/transcript-obama-syria-isis-speech/>. [Accessed 15 April 2015].
- Cohen, R. (2015). "Islam and the West at War", *The New York Times*, 18 February. Available at: http://www.nytimes.com/2015/02/17/opinion/roger-cohen-islam-and-the-west-at-war.html?_r=0. [Accessed 25 April 2015].

- Dupret, B. (2014). "Califat Islamique : du bon usage du mot", *SaphirNews.com*, 10 July. Available at: http://www.saphirnews.com/Califat-islamique-du-bon-usage-des-mots_a19233.html. [Accessed 24 February 2015].
- Enayat, H. (1982). *Modern Islamic political thought*, London: MacMillan Press Ltd.
- Esposito, J. L. (1984). *Islam and Politics*, New York: Syracuse University Press.
- Fazal, T. M. (2015). "Is the Islamic State a Secessionist movement?", *International Security Institute, ETH Zürich*, 22 February. Available at: <http://www.isn.ethz.ch/Digital-Library/Articles/Detail/?lng=en&id=188149>. [Accessed 22 February 2015].
- Le Figaro (2014). « EIIIL: création d'un "califat islamique" », 29 June. Available at: <http://www.lefigaro.fr/flash-actu/2014/06/29/97001-20140629FILWWW00146-eiil-creation-d-un-califat-islamique.php>. [Accessed 18 April 2015].
- Fritel, J. (2015). *Daesh, naissance d'un Etat terroriste*, France : ARTE et Pac Presse. Available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QNwPXu62r2w>. [Accessed 15 March 2015].
- The Islamic State (2014). *This is the promise of Allāh*, Al-Hayat Media Center, 29 June. Available at: https://ia902505.us.archive.org/28/items/poa_25984/EN.pdf. [Accessed 27 February 2015].
- Gartenstein-Ross, D. (2015). "How many fighters does the Islamic State really have?", *War on the Rocks*, February. Available at: <http://warontherocks.com/2015/02/how-many-fighters-does-the-islamic-state-really-have/?singlepage=1>. [Accessed 16 April 2015].
- Harling, P. (2015). "Etat Islamique, un monstre providentiel". *Le Monde Diplomatique*, September. Available at: <http://www.monde-diplomatique.fr/2014/09/HARLING/50787>. [Accessed 23 February 2015].
- Jenkins, J. (2015). "What the Atlantic gets dangerously wrong about ISIS and Islam", *Think Progress*, 18 February. Available at: <http://thinkprogress.org/world/2015/02/18/3624121/atlantic-gets-dangerously-wrong-isis-islam/>. [Accessed 15 April 2015].
- Khaama Press (2015). "ISIS, Taliban announced Jihad against each other", *Khaama Press*, 20 April. Available at: <http://www.khaama.com/isis-taliban-announced-jihad-against-each-other-3206>. [Accessed 23 April 2015].
- Lamrabet, A. (2010). *Relecture du concept coranique « al-khilafa »*, *Groupe international d'études et de réflexion sur les femmes en Islam*, 24 March. Available at: <http://www.gierfi.org/documents/articles/Al-khilafa.pdf>. [17 April 2015].
- Mary, A. (1995). « Religion de la tradition et religieux post-traditionnel », *Enquête*, 2, p. 121-142.
- Miquel, A. (1982). "Autour du Califat et de la notion de légitimité", *Tiers-Monde*, 23 (92), p. 791-794.
- Moore, J. (2014). "Mosul Seized: Jihadis Loot \$429m from City's Central Bank to Make Isis World's Richest Terror Force", *The International Financial Times*, 11 June. Available at: <http://www.ibtimes.co.uk/mosul-seized-jihadis-loot-429m-citys-central-bank-make-isis-worlds-richest-terror-force-1452190>. [Accessed 16 April 2015].
- L'Obs (2014). « L'EIIIL annonce un "califat islamique" en Syrie et en Irak », 29 June. Available at: <http://tempsreel.nouvelobs.com/monde/20140629.OBS2132/1-eiil-etablir-un-califat-islamique-en-syrie-et-en-irak.html>. [Accessed 18 April 2015].

- Paret, R. (1970). « Signification coranique de Ḥalifa et d'autres dérivés de la racine Ḥalafa », *Studia Islamica*, 31, p. 211-217.
- Pickthall, M. M. (1930). *The meaning of the glorious Quran*, Hyderabad: Government Central Press (1938). Available at: <http://www.sacred-texts.com/isl/pick/>. [Accessed 25 April 2015].
- Rachid, Q. (2015). “ISIS really want power – not Islam”, *Patheos*, 18 February. Available on: <http://www.patheos.com/blogs/islamahmadiyya/2015/02/isis-really-wants-power-not-islam/>. [Accessed 15 April 2015].
- Reed, J. (2015). “Trucks struggle to navigate Iraq’s Isis-controlled roads”, *Financial Times*, 14 April. Available at: <http://www.ft.com/cms/s/0/3865f40e-e12e-11e4-9b30-00144feab7de.html#axzz3Y89tsMIV>. [Accessed 23 April 2015].
- Saheeh International (2010). *The Qur’ān with Sūrah introduction and appendices*, Birmingham: Maktabah.
- Shany, Y., Cohen, A. and Mimran Tal (2014). “ISIS: Is the Islamic State really a state?”, *The Israel Democracy Institute*, 14 September. Available at: <http://en.idi.org.il/analysis/articles/isis-is-the-islamic-state-really-a-state>. [Accessed 22 April 2015].
- Vice News (2014). *Bulldozing the Border Between Iraq and Syria: The Islamic State*, 13 August. Available at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TxX_THjtXOW. [Accessed 23 April 2015].
- Watt, M. W. (1968). *Islamic political thought: the basic concepts*, Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.
- Weber, M. (1922). *Economie et Société*, Paris : Pocket (2003).
- Withnall, A. (2014). “Iraq crisis: What is a caliphate?”, *The Independent*, 30 June. Available at: <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/middle-east/iraq-crisis-what-is-a-caliphate-9572100.html>. [Accessed 18 April 2015].
- Wood, G. (2015). “What ISIS really wants”, *The Atlantic*, March. Available at: <http://www.theatlantic.com/features/archive/2015/02/what-isis-really-wants/384980/>. [Accessed 15 April 2015].
- Zelin, A. Y. (2014). “The War between ISIS and al-Qaeda for Supremacy of the Global Jihadist Movement”, *The Washington Institute for Near East Policy*, June. Available at: <http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/the-war-between-isis-and-al-qaeda-for-supremacy-of-the-global-jihadist>. [Accessed 21 April 2015].