

LASTING AND EXPANDING: AN ANALYSIS OF THE ISLAMIC STATE'S INCENTIVE SYSTEM

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INTRODUCTION

In the past five years, millions of people have lost their homes, loved ones, and lives.² The Syrian territory is now a battlefield, contested by multiple actors. The rise of the Islamic State underscores the hopeless nature of this bloody quagmire. The speed at which the Islamic State has captured and held territory, as well as the degree to which it has dominated the Western psyche and monopolized Western fears, has been met with both shock and panic. Newspapers headlines scream about the unique and terrifying threat of the Islamic State and the imminent destruction of the West at its hands. But at its core the Islamic State is, like any other organization, dependent on manpower and materials. Control of large population centers and the constant recruitment of new members are essential for the Islamic State's continued success and the expansion of its caliphate, especially in the face of increased military opposition from its adversaries and the on-going drain of its resources from the use of suicide bombings and military campaigns.

The collective action problem burdens the Islamic State. Broadly defined, the collective action problem states that an organization cannot inspire mass mobilization with ease.³ Why would someone participate when the costs are so high and the benefits are so low? For example, an individual deciding whether or not to join the Islamic State must consider (consciously or not) the free rider problem and the fact that individual contribution is not pivotal, while also confronting fears about the risks associated with participation.⁴

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² Ben Taub, "The Assad Filed", *The New Yorker* (2016).

³ Stathis N. Kalyvas and Matthew Adam Kocher, "How "Free" Is Free Riding in Civil Wars?: Violence, Insurgency, and the Collective Action Problem." *World Politics* 59 (2007): 178

⁴ Jeremy M. Weinstein, *Inside Rebellion: The Politics of Insurgent Violence*, (Cambridge,

The Islamic State has repackaged and re-worked techniques to alleviate the collective action problem in a highly successful and visible way, publically recruiting both locally and internationally. I will examine how the Islamic State exploits security considerations and individual-level grievances, all while mobilizing community and patronage networks to attract new recruits. In doing so, I will critically assess how effectively the existing literature on incentive systems captures the Islamic State.

In the past decades, scholarship has focused on insurgency groups' incentive structures to better understand individuals' motivations for joining them. During a conflict, the leadership on each side try to out-maneuver their opponents in controlling the unarmed and unaffiliated masses. When it comes to Syria, violence proliferates amongst multiple actors. Notably, the Islamic State is competing with the Russian and Iranian-backed Bashar al-Assad Syrian regime, the United States-backed Iraqi government, the Free Syrian Army, the Kurds, and the al-Qaeda affiliated Nusra Front. Each of these groups has carved out small areas of influence, semi-order, and pseudo-sovereignty, which they use as springboards for their territorial and political objectives.

With the globalization of conflict and the technological revolution, the methods of recruiting have broadened significantly. These changes are particularly evident in the Islamic State's recruitment of foreign fighters. Foreigners have historically played a role in conflicts, famously in the Spanish Civil War and the Greek War of Independence, but never to the extent made possible by modern telecommunications technology.⁵ The Syrian situation recalls these prior instances; especially as the foreign jihadi and foreign fighter phenomena have evolved into an essential and highly visible element of the conflict.

As the Islamic State targets a variety of audiences, it is pertinent to ask how the Islamic State's incentive system works. Although it must be acknowledged that there is extreme variation in the type of actor and the intensity of participation within each audience, I am interested in exploring the general trends that differ in this targeted process. Namely: How does the Islamic State repack-age oft-used mechanisms, like material benefits or protection, in successful and potentially new ways? How does it change, morph, and redefine itself in relation

Cambridge University Press, 2006), 42.

⁵ Kalyvas and Kocher (2007), 211.

to these different audiences?

In pursuit of a satisfactory answer to the above questions, I will examine three elements of the Islamic State's recruitment practices: 1) How the Islamic State's incentive system operates on both a local and global level, 2) Where there is overlap between these two audiences, and 3) Where distinctions arise. Additionally, I will examine how intentionally the core structure of the Islamic State actually promotes and propagates certain narratives. I focus my analysis on two specific locations as case studies for the Islamic State's audience. To evaluate local dynamics and describe how a conquering insurgency traditionally entices local actors to opt-in, I will focus on Raqqa, the capital of the Islamic State's caliphate. To explore how the Islamic State fuses itself to pre-existing societal ills, I will study the incentive system at work in Belgium, namely the Molenbeek and Schaerbeek neighborhoods outside of Brussels. These areas have been labeled as safe-havens and hotbeds for jihadist activity and are where the Paris attacks of 2015 were planned.

Therefore, my project is aimed at unpacking the Islamic State's networks and incentive system and looking primarily at how it overcomes the collective action problem on a multi-tiered level; both in terms of the local Syrian-Iraqi community (specifically in Raqqa) and in reference to the global community (using Molenbeek and Schaerbeek as exemplars). This paper presents a nuanced account of what "membership" at its core entails, and how its intensity ebbs and flows between Raqqa and Belgium. In confronting previous literature, I hope to demonstrate that the audience to which the Islamic State directs itself is wide and varied in motivations and roles, as well as undermine the simple narrative of ideological impetus as the sole motivating factor.

Literature Review

I will assess the strategies and actions of the Islamic State in reference to these seven mechanisms: contingency and sovereignty, protection and security, material benefits and club goods, individual level incentives, social focal points and community, patronage networks and quotidian relationships, and ideological commitment. While I am limiting my study to a discussion of these seven mechanisms, I acknowledge that scholarship has explored and identified other mechanisms, but have chosen these seven mechanisms as, in my opinion, they encompass the largest swathe of scholarship.

Contingency and Sovereignty

As Ana Arjona and Stathis Kalyvas discuss in their article, “Rebelling Against Rebellion,” when a ruling group has a monopoly over violence and the power of the purse, it permits them to control the use of selective violence, the dispersion of information, quotidian norms and rituals, and the economic market.⁶ In order to survive, individuals living under the new sovereignty of an insurgent group must shift their preferences to align with those of the sovereign.

By functioning, as a would-be state, an insurgent organization establishes a bureaucratic apparatus that commands local presence. In this narrative, control signals credibility, allows for the allocation of goods and services, facilitates direct monitoring and population control, monopolizes socialization, and, as argued by Arjona and Kalyvas, is a self-reinforcing dynamic of legitimacy.⁷ Sovereignty, at its most basic, therefore, incentivizes individuals to comply with the group in charge.⁸

Protection and Security

As asserted by Macartan Humphreys and Jeremy Weinstein in their article “Who Fights? The Determinants of Participation in Civil War”, the desire and necessity to improve one’s own security drives decision-making in times of anarchy and conflict. Security considerations can also explain why individuals join certain factions in times of war.⁹

Similarly, Kalyvas and Kocher argue that non-participation is not costless. It is their estimation that, in irregular wars, especially where the state actor employs indiscriminant, retaliatory violent tactics, civilians are directly implicated and more likely to be victims of incredible violence.¹⁰ Thus, participation in the terrorist organization actually improves an individual’s odds of survival

⁶ Ana M. Arjona and Stathis N. Kalyvas, “Rebelling Against Rebellion: Comparing Insurgent and Counterinsurgent Recruitment.” *Centre for Research on Inequality, Human Security, and Ethnicity* (2009), 13.

⁷ Ibid, 12.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Macartan Humphreys and Jeremy M. Weinstein, “Who Fights? The Determinants of Participation in Civil War,” *American Journal of Political Science* 52, no. 2 (2008), 449.

¹⁰ Kalyvas and Kocher (2008), 186.

because combatants are both better equipped to deal with threats as members of the group and because cooperation buys protection.¹¹

Material Benefits and Club Goods

Incentives like material motivations and benefits often persuade individuals to join organizations. In order to rapidly attract followers, many groups use material resources as selective incentives and “club goods”, conditional on loyalty and membership. Organizations with control over a territory (and thus, its economic apparatuses and markets) use goods to force membership. By positioning themselves as the sole providers of goods and services, these organizations can socially isolate civilians who do not opt-in.¹² Membership is required in order to gain access to even the most basic everyday goods, like bread and electricity.¹³

In his book *The Politics of Insurgent Violence*, Jeremy Weinstein examines how insurgent groups form, highlighting groups that use material resources to rapidly attract followers to overcome collective action problems. He describes these “consumer groups” as organizations that entice opportunists and loyalists by promising luxury items, like cars, scarce Western goods, and tax exemptions - deemed “club goods.”¹⁴ Greed is a motivator for active loyalty and membership. Per Weinstein’s assessment, those attracted by material goods lack ideological commitment and community ties, remaining involved only as long as it is materially beneficial.¹⁵

Individual Level Incentives

When assessing individualist logic, it is important to avoid the assumption that individuals are merely actors manipulated by the state or the organization at large. As Kalyvas argues, “The locus of agency is as likely to be at the bottom as at the top, so civilians cannot be treated as passive, manipulated, or invisible actors; indeed, they often manipulate central actors to settle their own conflicts.”¹⁶ An individual’s rea-

¹¹ Ibid, 191.

¹² Eli Berman, *Radical, Religious, and Violent: The New Economics of Terrorism* (Boston: MIT Press, 2011), 83.

¹³ Weinstein (2006), 9.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Ibid, 10.

¹⁶ Lars-Erik Cederman, Kristian-Skrede Gleditsch, and Halyard Buhaug, *Inequality, Grievances, and Civil War* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 21.

sons for mobilization are often highly personal and unrelated to the over-arching ideological vision of an organization. Building on Kalyvas's conclusions about the agency of individuals, membership in a successful organization, especially one in charge of the mechanism of coercion and control, can function as an opportunity to increase social position and self-worth. Individuals desire power to settle local scores, for example: taking revenge, engaging in personal feuds, obtaining local power, and eliminating-off local rivals.¹⁷

Social Focal Points and Communities

As argued by Timur Kuran, most individuals are threshold-based actors, meaning that, if they were to see their peers joining, they would feel more inclined to do the same.¹⁸ Mechanisms such as accessible information, status rewards, and norms of reciprocity motivate more and more people to mobilize.

The community-level analysis is further championed by Roger Petersen, who defines communities according to the following essential five conditions; direct relations between members, relations that are many-sided (with economic, social, and cultural components), norms of reciprocity acknowledged amongst members, rough equality of material conditions, and a common set of beliefs and values.¹⁹ Since mobilization and opting into participation involves the acceptance of risk, strong communities can play a role in mitigating fears.²⁰

Social focal points, which serve as indicators for individuals of the general opinions of the community, are manipulated and controlled by the ruling group.²¹ In line with Kuran and Petersen's assessments, individuals use the actions of their fellow community members as reference points on which to base action or inaction.

Patronage Networks and Quotidian Relationships

Patronage networks structure trust and information between individuals. An

¹⁷ John Mueller, "The Banality of 'Ethnic War'" *International Security* 25, no. 1 (2000), 43.

¹⁸ Timur Kuran, "Now Out of Never: The Element of Surprise in the East European Revolution of 1989." *World Politics* 44, no. 1 (1991), 21.

¹⁹ Roger D. Petersen, *Resistance and Rebellion: Lessons from Eastern Europe* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 16.

²⁰ Ibid, 15.

²¹ Ibid, 22.

incoming power often attempts to integrate itself into pre-existing patronage networks, using them to achieve its objectives. On a micro and familial level, patronage networks help organize participation as they permit face-to-face contact and visible touch-points of belief and trust. According to Sarah Parkinson, quotidian and familial networks often serve as the blueprints onto which insurgent goals are pasted.²² Consequently, social ties provide a way of layering new organizations atop older relations, and thus combining local and wide-reaching objectives.

Ideological Commitment

Finally, as Jeremy Weinstein argues, ideological commitment to a group's goals and sense of duty to join can push individuals to aid in the cause.²³ He argues that religious extremism drives insurgents to incur greater dangers in the name of God. In this narrative, there is a coupling of rational calculus and ideological fervor – sacrifice is presented as a logical step towards promised salvation.²⁴ In her book *Peripheral Visions*, Lisa Wedeen discusses how Islam becomes highly political, describing how “Movements are political in the sense that they aspire to render all aspects of Muslims lives a means of realizing God's will.”²⁵

THEORY

All armed groups face the problem of mobilization, as they must provide a persuasive answer to the question: “Why should I fight and die for you?”²⁶ In its' answer, the group must overcome the collective action problem, a problem of coordination between principals and agents, and a time-consistency problem for the acquisition of benefits and rewards by those who mobilize.²⁷ Unlike previous theories and the rhetoric of mainstream media, that often spout one silver bullet reason for mobilization, or overemphasize the importance of ideological and radicalization without paying appropriate attention to the extreme variation in motivation or

²² Sarah Elizabeth Parkinson, “Organizing Rebellion: Rethinking High-Risk Mobilization and Social Networks in War.” *American Political Science Review* 107, no. 3 (2013), 419.

²³ Weinstein (2006), 10.

²⁴ Nichole Argo, “Why Flight?: Examining Self-Interested Versus Communally-Oriented Motivations in Palestinian Resistance and Rebellion”, *Security Studies* 18, no. 4 (2009), 656-657.

²⁵ Lisa Wedeen, *Peripheral Visions* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008), 156.

²⁶ Anthony Vinci, “The ‘Problems of Mobilization’ and the Analysis of Armed Groups”, *Parameters* 36 no. 1 (2006), 51.

²⁷ *Ibid*, 52.

the constant coupling and uncoupling of local and global dynamics, I assert that the Islamic State's use of mobilization techniques in accordance with its' differing audiences has fundamentally redefined understandings of both membership and participation.

From the above toolkit of potential incentives to mobilize, the Islamic State picks and chooses based on audience - ensuring a narrative with powerful resonance. For those in the seized territories, the Islamic State employs sovereignty and contingency, security considerations, material goods, individual-level incentives, community-level incentives, and ideology to varying degree. However, the assessments of the previous literature, especially its presentation of conflicts and communal norms as static, do not fully capture the tendencies at place. For those in the seized territories, the Islamic State employs sovereignty and contingency, security considerations, material goods, individual-level incentives, community-level incentives, and ideology to varying degree. However, the assessments of the previous literature, especially its presentation of conflicts and communal norms as static, do not fully capture the tendencies at place. When conceptualizing participation under these conditions, I want to emphasize that the participation of the majority of Syrians in the seized territories, though deemed voluntary in the literature, is actually a question of survival. Joining the Islamic State is about choosing the best among a collection of terrible options. The perceived order provided by Islamic State is actually a product of fear and anxiety. As Mousab Alhamadee, a Syrian writer originally from Hama describes, the Islamic State controlled areas are "hostile environment[s] not just for minorities, but for a broad swathe of citizens."²⁸

When assessed in the foreign fighter context, security and protection must function differently. Target audiences abroad - namely those the Islamic State aims to recruit (loyalists) or inspire (sympathizers) - are not subject to the same present and physical day-to-day danger as those in the seized territories. Separated and insulated from the anarchic conditions that rage in Syria, they do not naturally assume survival and utility maximization roles that prioritize immediate security overall. In other words, joining the organization does not boil down to a life-or-death consideration. The same promise of immediate physical

²⁸ Avi Asher-Schapiro and Sam Heller, "How Five Years of War Has Fractured Syria Into Four States." *Vice News* (2016)

security made to citizens in Raqqa should not be enough to convince foreigners, who arguably have more to lose by going to Syria than staying at home in Belgium. The following sections of the paper will illuminate this claim. Firstly, I will describe the choice of the two case studies, and then will examine the evidence to support my claim, demonstrating the variation between what resonates in Raqqa versus what resonates in Belgium.

CASE SELECTION

In order to assess my hypothesized theory, I will use the cases of Raqqa and Molenbeek and Schaerbeek. While obviously each population in itself includes high levels of variation, as well as multiple other interesting distinctions, these cases have been chosen for a particular reason in regards to the multi-faceted nature of the Islamic State. The Islamic State has positioned itself as not only a dually oriented organization, but also one that promises to fulfill multiple roles - structuring a society and providing goods and services as a state does and directing military action. The “state” aspect of the Islamic State must not be taken for granted, and in choosing to assess both Raqqa and Belgium, I hope to explore the full dynamics of statehood at play.

The Islamic State is not the first transnational organization to preach its message abroad. Al-Qaeda, for example, recruited and targeted foreign audiences, using the Internet to reach far-flung potential jihadists.²⁹ The Islamic State has built on these past attempts at transnational recruitment with a specific combination and marketing of incentives that has drawn, by some estimates, between 27,000 and 31,000 foreigners to the Islamic State.³⁰ This level of support massively outstrips the high-water marks of both their organizational predecessors and contemporary competitors. Coupled with on-the-ground alliances and membership of conquered people in Iraq and Syria, the success of recruiting efforts contributes to the ongoing longevity and expansion of the Islamic State.

On the choice of Molenbeek and Schaerbeek – I recognize that these are not the only places from which foreign Islamic State fighters originate, nor are they the sole areas where attacks on foreign soil are planned. However, because they are

²⁹ J.M. Berger and Jessica Stern, “ISIS and the Foreign-Fighter Phenomenon”, *The Atlantic* (2015)

³⁰ The Soufan Group, “Foreign Fighters: An Updates Assessment of the Flow of Foreign Fighters into Syria and Iraq (2015), 4.

the hometowns of the Abaaoud and Abdelsalem brothers, the masterminds and perpetrators of the recent attacks in Paris and Belgium, Molenbeek and Schaerbeek, and have therefore become the face of the foreign fighter and foreign jihadi syndrome.³¹

Concerning Raqqa, there is little information available when it comes to daily dynamics and procedures. I am, to some degree, beholden to the image of Raqqa that the Islamic State wants to distribute. Outside of Islamic State propaganda, it is very difficult to even partially access objective information on how that society functions. Therefore, I recognize the speculative nature of my analysis and hope that, as more information is revealed and as the society opens up, my primary claims are re-assessed.

EVIDENCE

Raqqa:

In Raqqa, tactics associated with contingency and sovereignty, material benefits and club goods, individual level incentives, social focal points and communities, patronage networks, and ideological commitment are employed. However, security concerns underlie each of these mechanisms.

Contingency and Sovereignty

The use of highly public and visible punishments betrays the Islamic State's anxiety - a need to control and coerce that is in no way organic. It is a constant and omnipresent reminder of the organization. In Raqqa, stability is just oppression by another name. These seized communities have little choice but to acquiesce, when the only alternatives are the ruthless Assad regime and the perceived hapless Free Syrian Army.³²

An International Crisis Group report further unpacks the relationship between disorder and the Islamic State. It asserts that the initial expansion of the group is a product of the instability of war, as the organization exploited opportunities and vacancies left behind by the Assad regime's loss of regional

³¹ Andrew Higgins and Kimiko de Freytas-Tamura, "In Suspects' Brussels Neighborhood, a History of Petty Crimes and Missed Chances.", *New York Times* (2015).

³² International Crisis Group Special Report, "Exploiting Disorder: al-Qaeda and the Islamic State" *International Crisis Group* (2016), 29.

control, state-wide monopoly of violence, and hegemony.³³ The report contends that, “The lack of avenues for peaceful dissent and opportunities for young people make many societies vulnerable to [Islamic State] recruitment, even if it lures only tiny minorities.³⁴ Individuals in the seized territories continue cooperation with the Islamic State because of the promise of some stability in an otherwise anarchic world. Yet this sense of stability should not be over-stated, as it is deeply situational and relative.

The Islamic State is hyper-aware of its powerful position, deliberately constructing an image of effective governance in its propaganda. For example, in the fourth issue of the Islamic State’s newsletter, “*Dabiq*,” there is a whole section titled, “A Window into the Islamic State,” which shows images of services, such as the restoration of electricity, care for the elderly, street cleaning, and medical services apparently provided by the group to residents in Raqqa.³⁵ These newsletters are printed in English, German, French, and Russian, among other languages.³⁶ However, they are not released in Arabic. Since these newsletters are directed towards an outward audience, it could be argued that they are intended to court potential foreign fighters. To the outside world, the Islamic State portrays itself as a functioning state. But how would the promise of these goods and services incentivize Westerners to join when they hail from societies that already provide these services absent the presence of fear and terror? Perhaps the Islamic State does not intend to use this type of propaganda for foreign recruitment purposes. Instead, in curating its image as a deeply entrenched state-like entity, the Islamic State hopes to inspire fear in its enemies abroad.

This propaganda constructs a perception of the Islamic State as stable, ordered, and deeply institutionalized with apparently significant local support. It appears to the undiscerning eye as a legitimate organization. By Arjona and Kalyvas’s argument, legitimacy is a self-reinforcing dynamic that improves with increased participation and control. I argue, however, that longevity – or even power – do not immediately translate to legitimacy. One need look no further for an example than the Assad family, which was brutally in power for over forty years, yet whose legitimacy was still questioned.

The question of legitimacy is raised anew for the seized territories. The Is-

³³ Ibid, 11.

³⁴ Ibid, 22.

³⁵ “The Failed Crusade”, *Dabiq* 4 (2014), 4.

³⁶ Berger and Stern (2015).

lamic State at its core is essentially an Iraqi organization.³⁷ In Syria and in Raqqa, for example, the leadership is predominantly Iraqi and foreign. The question remains, how then would Arjona and Kalyvas's mechanism of legitimacy function, especially in light of the influx of foreign fighters who are, by all accounts, given preferential treatment by the group?³⁸

Instead, when it comes to the seized populations, as long as the Islamic State positions itself as stable in relation to the actors with whom it competes and continues to use fear as a conduit for order, it need not be a fully functioning or legitimate government to force local participation. Although one can question whether or not individuals in the seized territories actually shift their preferences to align with those of the Islamic State, – yet it is clear that many comply in order to survive. Finally, the Islamic State's attempts to present itself as an effective bureaucratic and state-like entity should not be misconstrued as a credible incentive for foreigners to join. While certain individuals may travel to Syria for these reasons, this type of propaganda is, in my opinion, oriented towards a different audience; the greater global audience at large. The Islamic State's propaganda is not meant for consumption by potential foreign fighters, but rather designed to inspire fear abroad.

Protection and Security

Particularly in the case of the Syrian crisis, where there are multiple armed actors, fuzzy alliances, and the frequent swapping of cities, violence is omnipresent and unselective. In his *Syrian Notebook*, Jonathan Littell observes that there was “Hardly a day without death or a wounded person, whatever the neighborhood.”³⁹

The Assad regime is certainly a state wielding indiscriminate and unselective violence. Littell, in another description of violence perpetrated by the Assad regime, recounts how the regime snipers “...shot at kids” and “killed a mentally handicapped person.”⁴⁰ The Assad regime has pursued a scorched earth poli-

³⁷ Richard Barrett and Joanne J. Myers, “Foreign Fighters in Syria” Lecture (2014)

³⁸ Robert Smith and Stacey Vanek Smith, “Episode 667: Auditing ISIS”, *NPR Planet Money* (2016), 6:30.

³⁹ Jonathan Littell, *Syrian Notebooks: Inside the Homs Uprising* (Verso: 2015), 207.

⁴⁰ Ibid, 163 and 165

cy, employing chemical weapons and barrel bombs against civilian populations.⁴¹ Ziad Hamoud, in an interview with Robin Yassin-Kassab, alludes to Kalyvas and Kocher's assertions about the dangers of being a non-combatant, saying, "The safest place to live is near the front line. In the civilian areas away from the battle - this is where the barrel bombs drop...For the regime, the battle against the civil and political alternative is more important than the military battle."⁴²

The regime's monopoly of violence and security, however, is distributed unequally over the national territory. On a local level, each particular group, from the Free Syrian Army, to the Kurdish forces, to the Islamic State, exercises varying degrees of control. Raqqa is currently under the rule of the Islamic State and, thus, to ensure security, citizens cooperate with the group. Only those who participate are assured protection under its semi-secure umbrella created by its monopoly of violence. Since free-riding not only excludes an individual from that security but also acts as a direct danger to their person, individuals are incentivized to opt-in to participation.⁴³

The Islamic State has been very public in asserting its apparent power and dominion over Raqqa. After taking the city in December 2013, Islamic State fighters displayed the corpses of regime soldiers in downtown Raqqa, their heads mounted on fence posts.⁴⁴ To further establish itself as the unquestioned guarantor of security, the Islamic State tortured and murdered a well-liked rebel leader and doctor.⁴⁵ Furthermore, armed men known as the Hisbah, who act at once as morality police and surveillance apparatus, patrol the city.⁴⁶ Through all of these mechanisms, the Islamic State has aimed to position itself as the only force that can protect an individual, thereby incentivizing participation.

Beyond monopolizing violence, the Islamic State is also the safeguard of jurisprudence, law, and order. Through shariah courts and local alliances, the Islamic State has rendered its norms as the laws of the land.⁴⁷ In Raqqa, the Islamic State organized a judicial system. Its judges fill a variety of purposes, both impos-

⁴¹ Robin Yassin-Kassab and Leila al-Shami, *Burning Country: Syrians in Revolution and War* (London: Pluto Press, 2016), 138.

⁴² Ibid, 106.

⁴³ Kalyvas and Kocher (2007), 185.

⁴⁴ VICE News, "The Islamic State (Full Length)", *VICE News Show* (2014), 6:30.

⁴⁵ Christoph Reuter, "The Terror Strategist: Secret Files Reveal the Structure of the Islamic State", *SpiegelOnline* (2015).

⁴⁶ VICE News (2014), 18:29.

⁴⁷ Quinn Mecham, "How much of a state is the Islamic State?" *Washington Post* (2015)

ing harsh punishments for crimes against shariah, and also acting as arbitrators who settle more mundane disputes like farming quarrels.⁴⁸ If one wants to be favored in the court system, one at least has to be a complicit member of the organization. Cooperation with the Islamic State serves a utilitarian purpose as protection and justice are only extended to those who pledge allegiance.

Despite the evidence presented above, the relationship between security and the Islamic State is not so simple. The Islamic State positions itself as a safety guarantor while simultaneously courting violent responses from foreign enemies. In many of its execution videos, the Islamic State explicitly threatens the West – calling on sympathizers everywhere to engage in inspired attacks. These same videos include the beheadings of Western hostages. In a propaganda video released by the Islamic State, a foreign fighter from Australia challenges Western Coalition Forces to “bring every nation that you wish to us...it means nothing to ⁴⁹us...bring your planes” – one of many examples of the organization deliberately antagonizing the West.⁵⁰ This calls into question the protection services that the Islamic State apparently offers to citizens of Raqqa. How can an organization claim to be a protector while also deliberately inviting attacks and violence?

The Islamic State’s messianic worldview, evident through the use of “Dabiq” as the title of their newsletters, also underscores the paradox in the protection and security incentive offered. The introduction of the first issue of “Dabiq” explains that the magazine is named for “Dabiq in the northern countryside of Halab (Aleppo) in Sham. This place was mentioned in a hadith describing some of the events of the Malahim (what is sometimes referred to as Armageddon in English). One of the greatest battles between the Muslims and the crusaders will take place near Dabiq.”⁵¹ As is evident, under the messianic world-view, security and stability are in no way the end game.

When assessed in the foreign fighter context, security and protection must function differently. Target audiences abroad – namely those the Islamic State aims to recruit (loyalists) or inspire (sympathizers) – are not subject to the

⁴⁸ VICE News (2014), 27:53 and 28:43.

⁴⁹ Adam Withnall “Isis releases new execution video as it warns of Doomsday attack on UK”, *Independent* (2016).

⁵⁰ Hannah Strange “‘Bring Everything You Want to Us’: Australian Teen Runaway Reemerges Online ISIS Video.” *VICE News* (2014).

⁵¹ “The Return of Khilafah, *Dabiq* 1 (2014), 3.

same present and physical day-to-day danger as those in the seized territories. Separated and insulated from the anarchic conditions that rage in Syria, they do not naturally assume survival and utility maximization roles that prioritize immediate security overall. In other words, joining the organization does not boil down to a life-or-death consideration. The same promise of immediate physical security made to citizens in Raqqa should not be enough to convince foreigners, who arguably have more to lose by going to Syria than staying at home in Belgium.

Material Benefits and Club Goods

Material goods are certainly important to the Syrian context, as constant war has deprived the population of normal and dependable resources, let alone luxury and comfort items. However, it is important to challenge Weinstein's assertions about the power of material goods. In a book review of Weinstein, Stathis Kalyvas discusses the holes in Weinstein's argument. Namely, Kalyvas contends that Weinstein's argument about the utility of material goods in recruitment does not take into account interactions between rebels and civilians or interactions between rebels and state forces.⁵²

With the first of these two exclusions, Weinstein undermines the individual agency of civilians. Civilians, according to Kalyvas, have a much greater ability to demonstrate displeasure than Weinstein allows.⁵³ For example, civilians can flee. As evident from Peter Neumann's article "Victims, Perpetrators, and Assets: The Narratives of Islamic State Defectors," defections from the Islamic State are not uncommon. Neumann interviews fifty-eight people who defected from the Islamic State, presenting four key narratives that problematize the group's image of absolute power and unity.⁵⁴ Individuals in Syria, therefore, do have agency and choice. Furthermore, in omitting the importance of the state, Weinstein does not acknowledge that realities change throughout the course of a conflict. As Kalyvas points out, for Weinstein, only initial endowments matter and personal preferences are static in nature.⁵⁵ Keeping these criticisms in mind, I want to further nuance Weinstein's assertion of greed as a mobilizer.

⁵² Stathis N. Kalyvas Book Review of "Inside Rebellion: The Politics of Insurgent Violence" by Jeremy Weinstein, *Sage Publications: Comparative Political Studies* 40, n. 9 (2007), 1147.

⁵³ *Ibid*, 1147.

⁵⁴ Peter Neumann, "Victims, Perpetrators, Assets: The Narratives of Islamic State Defectors", *The International Centre for the Study of Radicalisation and Political Violence* (2015), 3.

⁵⁵ Kalyvas (2007), 1148.

When it comes to the Islamic State, material goods are employed on two levels. The Islamic State needs the majority of the population to at least passively collaborate and support the organization. Its robustness depends on taxing the population, so it must convince the majority of the community not to flee. On a different level, the Islamic State looks to recruit those who want to play an active role in the organization. Material goods are dangled in front of both audiences as a means to persuade, with greed considerations especially targeted towards those in the latter audience.

Upon conquering Raqqa, the Islamic State took administrative control of the city, establishing outreach centers, courts, and controlling services such as water, electricity, and bakeries.⁵⁶ The Islamic State is now in charge of industries, municipal services, and facilities through which it controls health services, shelter, education, and, more notably, bread prices.⁵⁷ Bread, especially, is essential to both establishing and maintaining authority. When taking Manbij, a city northeast of Aleppo, proper management of the city's grain distribution was essential to the Islamic State maintaining control.⁵⁸ In this same vein, in Raqqa, the Islamic State highly regulates bread prices, keeping them lower than pre-war standards so as to pacify the masses.⁵⁹ The Islamic State also manages all humanitarian services in Raqqa.⁶⁰

For citizens of Raqqa, the most minimal level of survival is impossible without collaborating with the Islamic State in some capacity. This type of collaboration and membership does not fit neatly into Weinstein's assessment. People trying to survive are not greedy, but desperate. Furthermore, the power of selective incentives and club goods is still up-for-debate. As highlighted by Elisabeth Wood's book, *Insurgent Collective Action and Civil War in El Salvador*, it is actually much easier than the theories assume for citizens to free-ride despite an organization's attempt to use material goods as selective incentives.⁶¹ Until further information is available from Raqqa and interviews can be conducted with

⁵⁶ Charles C. Caris and Samuel Reynolds, "ISIS Governance in Syria", *Institute of War* (2014)

⁵⁷ Charles Lister, "Jihadi Rivalry: The Islamic State Challenges al-Qaida", *Brookings Doha Center Analysis Paper* 16 (2016), 27.

⁵⁸ Yassin-Kassab and al-Shami (2016), 128.

⁵⁹ Lister (2016), 27.

⁶⁰ Caris and Reynolds (2016)

⁶¹ Elisabeth Jean Wood, *Insurgent Collective Action and Civil War in El Salvador* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 12.

citizens, the power of selective incentives and club goods in forcing widespread low-level participation should not be over-stated.

Two of the largest generators of revenue for the Islamic State are bribes and taxes (Planet Money). The Islamic State promotes its strict taxation system as a form of “zakat”, one of the Five Pillars of Islam that is akin to tithing in Catholicism (Rosenberg, Kulish, and Meyers 2015). The Islamic State set up an expansive bureaucracy to manage this stream of revenue. The Diwan al-Khadamat and the Diwan al-Rikaz, for example, are both offices in Raqqa that oversee the collection of a cleaning tax and smuggling taxes (Rosenberg, Kulish, and Meyers 2015). Also operating in Raqqa, the Zakat Bureau collects money from the wealthy, promising to redistribute it for the greater good of the community (VICE 2014, 32:43).

Confiscations and taxes together make up over 70% of the Islamic State’s revenue in some areas of Syria (Smith and Vanek Smith 2016, 9:50 and 13:40). According to a 2014 New York Times article entitled “Life in a Jihadist Capital: Order with a Darker Side,” Raqqa’s Credit Bank has become the caliphate’s tax authority (Hubbard and NYT employee 2014). Employees from this bank collect a tax of \$20 from every shop-owner every two months for electricity, water, and security (Hubbard and NYT employee 2014). In return, many shop-owners are given an official stamped receipt with the Islamic State’s logo (Hubbard and NYT employee 2014). The Islamic State even regulates the looting of artifacts, with a specific ministry designated to register and tax all discovered and smuggled antiquities (Smith and Vanek Smith 2016, 11:07).

However, not all of the taxes levied by the Islamic State are so systematic. Since the Islamic State controls all, it can arbitrarily levy taxes.⁶² As one former resident of Dier ez-Zor testified, Islamic State officials would often just show up at his door demanding money and were known to stop people on the street and ask for money.⁶³ For non-Islamic State fighters, there is no other option but to pay these taxes wherever and whenever they are levied.

Against this backdrop, the economic might of the Islamic State, while broadly used to pacify the masses, is also specifically marketed and directed at potential local fighters.⁶⁴ In Raqqa, there are two kinds of goods – those for Islamic State fighters, and those for civilians. Staples are expensive and, especially under

⁶² Smith and Vanek-Smith (2016), 14:23 and 14:40.

⁶³ Ibid, 13:53 and 14:29.

⁶⁴ Azadeh Moaveni, “ISIS Women and Enforces in Syria Recount Collaboration, Anguish, and Escape” *New York Times* (2015)

the stringent tax and zakat laws, the ordinary citizen does not have money to purchase luxury goods.⁶⁵

In Raqqa, those who join as loyalists and active participants are exempt from the harshest taxes, as well as rewarded with a salary and luxury items. The Islamic State uses these benefits to entice people to embed themselves more deeply into the organization, both in fighting positions and as members of the propaganda or media apparatus. In a political landscape like Syria, where there are a plethora of groups vying for the loyalty of local fighters in brief alliances, individuals weigh material and economic benefits when deciding for whom to fight.⁶⁶ The Islamic State has a massive advantage in this regard, paying fighters between \$330 and \$400, more than other Syrian rebel groups or the Syrian army.⁶⁷ In addition, the Islamic State promises food, luxury goods, cars, fuel, internet access, and even sex with Yazidi women for active participants.⁶⁸

While the incentive system of the Islamic State in the seized territories specifically targeted at fighters certainly displays tendencies in line with Weinstein's conception of greed, it holds less explanatory power for recruitment in the foreign context. Individuals in Belgium fit into neither of the two manners in which the Islamic State's use of material goods as selective incentives in the seized territories. Instead, the "greed" that operates within the foreign fighter phenomenon is greed for power and self-worth, as described in the section that follows.

Individual Level

In Raqqa, alignment with the Islamic State is a status-associated opportunity, as active members are awarded greater movement, freedom, and power. In order to credibly entice individuals and then integrate them into its system, the Islamic State positions itself as an organization that anoints and approves winners. For example, the Islamic State stages local religious competitions with monetary prizes as a means of promoting more active local buy-in.⁶⁹ These competitions are used

⁶⁵ Smith and Vanek-Smith (2016), 7:18.

⁶⁶ Vera Mironova, Loubna Mrie, and Sam Whitt, "Islamists at a Glance: Why Do Rebel Fighters Join Islamist Groups? (The Reasons May Have Less to do with Religiosity than You Might Think) *Political Violence @ a Glance* (2014).

⁶⁷ S.B. "Where the Islamic State gets its money" *The Economist* (2015)

⁶⁸ Smith and Vanek-Smith (2016), 6:30.

⁶⁹ Patrick Cockburn "Life under Isis: Why I deserted the 'Islamic State' rather than take part in executions, beheadings, and rape - the story of a former jihadi" *Independent* (2015).

as stages on which the Islamic State can proselytize and promote its ideological mission. For example, one Islamic State fighter from Falluja decided to join the organization despite the fact that his family fled. When discussing his motivations, he mentions that, as a child, he had won two prizes in competitions hosted by the Islamic State on religious topics and felt that he would benefit and thrive under the group.⁷⁰

The Islamic State also undermines the pre-war socio-economic hierarchy. As Robin Yassin-Kassab and Leila al-Shami put it, under the Islamic State, “peasants can rise to power without anything.”⁷¹ The social prestige factor corresponds with agency. The evaluation of agency must be done on a gradient. Many of those who take a more active role in the Islamic State are not power-hungry, but rather join in order to recover some semblance of self-worth. This nuance is especially interesting when applied to the troubling question of why women join the Islamic State. At first glance, one would assume that the Islamic State’s strict doctrine, which is highly restrictive to women (as it rejects all of the reforms that have been extended to women since the time of the *rashidun*) would deter females from taking committed participation.⁷² Despite this quandary, the Islamic State has created a space for women to take an active role in the Islamic State’s security and administrative apparatus in Raqqa.

Before Syria was engulfed in complete chaos, women were, albeit unequally across time and space, beginning to enjoy the benefits of modern society. Generally speaking, the three generations previous to the war saw the highest level of female independence in contemporary Syrian history, as women mixed freely with men and, in many places, socialized, and studied together.⁷³ Before the war, Raqqa was, like many Syrian cities, mixed. While on the one hand it was on the more conservative end of the spectrum, with most women wearing “abayas” and veils, it was also home to many Alawi civil servants. As did women generally, female residents of Raqqa were beginning to enjoy the effects of independence, attending college in increasing numbers and having greater freedom to choose their own spouses.⁷⁴

⁷⁰ Ibid.

⁷¹ Yassin-Kassab and al-Shami (2016), 138.

⁷² Berman (2011), 90.

⁷³ Moaveni (2015).

⁷⁴ Ibid.

Upon taking Raqqa, the Islamic State violently consolidated authority and enforced its radical doctrine, which restricted female freedom of movement and opportunity, re-relegating women to the confines of their homes.⁷⁵ The Islamic State already treats Syrians as second-class citizens when compared to foreign fighters, but Syrian women have been pushed even further down the social ladder, viewed as property.⁷⁶

The New York Times recently profiled three female former Raqqa residents - Dua, Aws, and Asma. These three women were members of the Khansaa Brigade, the all-women's morality police. When discussing their motivations for joining, all three mentioned their desire to win freedom of movement and income in a situation where they had otherwise been stripped of self-determination.⁷⁷ Being part of the Brigade gave them something to do, as well as power and money.⁷⁸ Especially against the backdrop of the widespread dogmatic restrictions on women employed by the Islamic State, the Khansaa Brigade provides some unrestricted opportunities. Since the Islamic State is the sole actor with the capacity for opportunity provision, it is necessary for those most marginalized and constrained by the strict society to join, in order to retain any individual freedoms.

Social Focal Points

In the Syrian case, the transition of the conflict from one of united Syrian nationalism to the current sectarian nightmare was a deliberate act of the Assad regime. As the International Crisis Group report emphasizes, the regime intentionally escalated and radicalized the initially peaceful conflict through “publicized violence, divisive sectarian discourse, [pitted] the ruling Alawite and other minorities against the Sunni majority, [escalated] collective punishment [and released] jailed radicals.”⁷⁹ The regime manipulated social focal points, emphasizing the use of mosques and Friday prayer ceremonies as gathering places so as to stir up communal tensions and fears along sectarian lines.⁸⁰

The Islamic State has followed the regime's example, controlling the public space and using it as a constant reminder of power. Community indicators, such

⁷⁵ Ibid.

⁷⁶ Ibid.

⁷⁷ Ibid.

⁷⁸ Ibid.

⁷⁹ International Crisis Group Special Report (2016), 7.

⁸⁰ Yassin-Kassab and al-Shami (2016), 91.

as caliphate celebrations in Raqqa's square or public pledges of allegiance to the Islamic State leaders, are widespread.⁸¹ Punishment for those who disobey is also public. In Raqqa, for example, a man convicted of murder was crucified and displayed in the public square, his body left to rot as a warning to other residents.⁸² These public displays of power operate as community indicators intended to influence the actions of threshold-based actors.

However, the importance of these social indicators in motivating participation in the seized territories is up for debate. Unlike typical insurgencies that build from the ground up (for which motivating first-movers is a challenge), the Islamic State in Raqqa is a conquering power.⁸³ It does not need to motivate first movers, but rather force widespread compliance and at least low-level collaboration.

Patronage Networks

In Raqqa, the Islamic State mapped itself onto the social and organizational life of the city, so any social triggers were controlled and pushed by the group itself. When expanding, the Islamic State looks to incentivize powerful families, local rebel groups, and tribal leaders.⁸⁴ Through its Tribal Bureau, the Islamic State exploits tribal divisions, infiltrating clans, and playing them off against each other.⁸⁵ The Islamic State again acknowledges this deliberate strategy in its propaganda. In the first issue of "Dabiq," the Islamic State lists the benefits (such as the return of rights and property to rightful owners) it has provided to local tribal leaders and dignitaries.⁸⁶ As do most states, in integrating itself into pre-existing grassroots structures, the Islamic State attempts to legitimize its mission and transform local networks into effective tools of recruitment.

The Islamic State also mobilizes familial networks. As Sarah Parkinson theorizes, individuals take cues from the actions of family members or trusted friends, often following them into mobilization, cooperation, and collaboration.

⁸¹ VICE News (2014), 14:44 and 17:20.

⁸² Ibid, 28:00.

⁸³ Petersen (2001), 2.

⁸⁴ Reuter, 2015.

⁸⁵ International Crisis Group Special Report (2016), 17.

⁸⁶ "The Return of Khilafah, *Dabiq* 1 (2014), 13-16.

tion.⁸⁷ I will use the role of women in the seized territories to highlight the influence of pre-war relationships and networks.

Returning to the three women profiled by *The New York Times*, the participation of Aws, Dua, and Asma was also impacted by familial and patronage networks. As their families and loved ones became further integrated into the Islamic State, these women began to opt-in as well. Dua and Aws were actually cousins and joined shortly following each other.⁸⁸

Before becoming members of the Khansaa Brigade, Dua and Aws both married foreign fighters; effectively marrying into the organization.⁸⁹ When describing why they decided to marry, both women discussed the social prestige and freedom considerations aforementioned. Yet, they also said that they did so for their family's sake.⁹⁰ This demonstrates how family life in Raqqa has been exported, now indiscernibly intertwined with the organization. The Islamic State tapped into pre-existing kinship and familial networks, using them as a low-commitment way to ramp up participation.

To some degree, by intentionally infiltrating pre-existing community networks, the Islamic State attempts to deflate the space between Weinstein's greed and grievance argument. In Weinstein's categorization, a group mobilizes either through ideology or through greed. In the latter category, fighters enticed by material goods lack community-level ties and are more likely to be undisciplined in relation to the community.⁹¹ However, the Islamic State intentionally took over networks in seized communities, perhaps in an attempt to mitigate the potential drawbacks of its foreigner-dominated leadership core. Thus, the Islamic State demonstrates that the use of material benefits and the mobilization of community ties are not mutually exclusive.

Ideological Commitment

In the case of Syria, sectarian divisions were enflamed by the regime. As Monzer al-Sallal put it, "The regime created the conditions to make it happen."⁹² The initial protests in Syria were organized around Friday prayers, not for their religious

⁸⁷ Parkinson (2013), 430.

⁸⁸ Moaveni (2015)

⁸⁹ Ibid

⁹⁰ Ibid

⁹¹ Weinstein (2006), 10.

⁹² Yassin-Kassab and al-Shami (2016), 108.

symbolism, but rather because these were the visible public spaces where people gathered.⁹³ For many, prayer was where the collective will and energy was formed and took shape, so it was only natural to begin organizing in these spaces.⁹⁴ Yet, as a result of regime brutality, religious divisions were reinforced.⁹⁵ According to one survey, 60% of people who joined Islamist groups in Syria and Iraq claimed they joined because they wanted to build an Islamist state and felt a sense of obligation to help the people.⁹⁶

The ideological commitment of an individual, even if fleeting or weak at first, is often amplified by in-group bias. In their article “Explaining Support for Combatants During Wartime,” Jason Lyall et al. demonstrate that, when an individual identifies as part of a group, and shares norms and practices with this group, he or she is more likely to view their actions favorably.⁹⁷ Retaliation against this in-group can actually further harden ideological commitments and push individuals to feel a duty or an obligation to act.⁹⁸ These in-group dynamics allow for a further “othering” of the enemy, as well as a dismissal of all those who do not actively join as traitorous or disloyal. Wedeen also underlines the importance of social factors and categories when it comes to the creation of the “other”. In her argument, “categories are iterated in antagonistic relation to other categories.”⁹⁹

The Islamic State has latched onto this tendency, setting itself apart ideologically from other actors in the region primarily through a strict adherence to “takfir”. Takfir is the dismissal of persons or groups appearing to be Muslim as non-Muslim either because they are tyrants, serving tyrants or operating in foreign interests, or improperly practicing the faith.¹⁰⁰ The takfir label permits the Islamic State to kill other Muslims without violating the Qur’anic rule in which

⁹³ Ben Taub, “The Assad Files”, *The New Yorker* (2016).

⁹⁴ Little (2015), 182

⁹⁵ Yassin-Kassab and al-Shami (2016), 109.

⁹⁶ Mironova et al. (2014).

⁹⁷ Jason Lyall, Graeme Blair, and Kosuke Imai “Explaining Support for Combatants during Wartime: A Survey Experiment in Afghanistan” *American Political Science Review* 107 n. 4 (2013), 679.

⁹⁸ Ibid, 681.

⁹⁹ Lisa Wedeen, *Peripheral Visions* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008), 167.

¹⁰⁰ Yassin-Kassab and al-Shami (2016), 26.

a Muslim cannot kill another.¹⁰¹

Belgium:

Since residents in Belgium do not need to worry about physical security in the same way as residents in Raqqa, other techniques resonate more powerfully, namely; material benefits and club goods, social focal points, patronage networks, and ideological commitment.

Protection and Security

When assessed in the foreign fighter context, security and protection must function differently. Target audiences abroad – namely those the Islamic State aims to recruit (loyalists) or inspire (sympathizers) – are not subject to the same present and physical day-to-day danger as those in the seized territories. Separated and insulated from the anarchic conditions that rage in Syria, they do not naturally assume survival and utility maximization roles that prioritize immediate security overall. In other words, joining the organization does not boil down to a life-or-death consideration. The same promise of immediate physical security made to citizens in Raqqa should not be enough to convince foreigners, who arguably have more to lose by going to Syria than staying at home in Belgium.

Material Benefits and Club Goods

Against this backdrop, the economic might of the Islamic State, while broadly used to pacify the masses, is also specifically marketed and directed at potential local fighters.¹⁰² In Raqqa, there are two kinds of goods – those for Islamic State fighters, and those for civilians. Staples are expensive and, especially under the stringent tax and zakat laws, the ordinary citizen does not have money to purchase luxury goods.¹⁰³

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¹⁰¹ Ibid.

¹⁰² Moaveni (2015).

¹⁰³ Smith and Vanek-Smith (2016), 7:18.

groups vying for the loyalty of local fighters in brief alliances, individuals weigh material and economic benefits when deciding for whom to fight.¹⁰⁴ The Islamic State has a massive advantage in this regard, paying fighters between \$330 and \$400, more than other Syrian rebel groups or the Syrian army.¹⁰⁵ In addition, the Islamic State promises food, luxury goods, cars, fuel, internet access, and even sex with Yazidi women for active participants.¹⁰⁶

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Individual Level Incentives

For foreign fighters coming from Belgium, the personal agenda narrative operates differently. For the thousands of foreign fighters (the majority of whom are adolescents) leaving behind family and comfort in Europe for carnage in Syria, grievances cited as motivation are also often personal and local. However, because their association with the region and with the conflict is temporally brief, they do not have age-old and long-held grievances against the regime. Personal difficulties such as failing out of school or getting into skirmishes with the police can leave these individuals feeling ill at ease and excluded.¹⁰⁷ For many of these teenagers, the decision to go to the Islamic State can be as much an act of defiance against societal conventions and familial norms as it is an opportunity to gain recognition and personal fulfillment.

In the Belgian context, foreign fighters often cite disengagement and failures of the society at-large as reasons for traveling. A historically conservative Christian country, Belgium, since the mid-2000s, has pivoted towards secular-

¹⁰⁴ Mironova et al. (2016).

¹⁰⁵ S.B. (2015).

¹⁰⁶ Smith and Vanek-Smith (2016), 6:30.

¹⁰⁷ Oliver Roy, "What is the driving force behind jihadist terrorism? A scientific perspective on the causes/circumstances of joining the scene" *BKA Autumn Conference* (2015), 11.

ism and the privatization of religion.¹⁰⁸ At the same time, the Muslim population in Belgium has doubled over the past ten years, and foreigners are now the majority populations in the major Belgian cities of Antwerp and Brussels.¹⁰⁹ As a newly secular nation, the Belgian government is supposed to grant money equally to communities of different faiths. However, despite the large numbers of Muslims in the Belgian population, Muslim communities do not consistently receive the government subsidies to which they are entitled.¹¹⁰ Instead, the government and the non-Muslim population treat these Muslims communities, although deeply embedded into the structure and quotidian life in Belgium, as “others”. These tensions most notably came to a head when the Belgian government banned the veil in 2012, leading to an explosion of anger in Muslim neighborhoods and a sense of further isolation and frustration.¹¹¹ In the aftermath of this incident, as many as 60% of Muslim youths by some estimates do not feel that they will ever be integrated into Belgian society, with 50% identifying themselves as victims of racism.¹¹²

In the Schaerbeek neighborhood, the third poorest community in Belgium, racism against Middle Eastern and Muslim members has been rampant for many decades. During the 1986 mayoral race, a candidate donned ethnic Moroccan clothes and rode a camel around the central square, declaring, “In 20 years all of Schaerbeek will look like this unless you vote for me.”¹¹³ This same candidate won the election and stayed in power for 19 years.

Yet, the increase of Muslim social and economic presence in Belgium has not translated into an increase in political parties dedicated to Muslim interests. In fact, multiple attempts to form a successful Islamist or Muslim immigrant-based political party have failed. The most successful Islamist party to date in Belgium is

¹⁰⁸ Theodoros Koutroubas, Ward Vloeberghs, and Zeynep Yanasmayan, “Political, Religious, and Ethnic Radicalisation among Muslims in Belgium” *MICROCON Policy Working Paper 5* (2009), 6.

¹⁰⁹ Sarah Teich, “Islamic Radicalization in Belgium”, *International Institute for Counter-Terrorism* (2015), 8.

¹¹⁰ Ibid, 13.

¹¹¹ Michael Birnbaum, “Why is tiny Belgium Europe’s jihad recruiting hub?” *Washington Post* (2015).

¹¹² Ibid, 11.

¹¹³ Alissa J. Rubin, “Radicalization of a Promising Student Turned Bomb Maker in Brussels” *New York Times* (2016).

the Islam Party, which elected two representatives to Parliament in 2012.¹¹⁴ Outside of this party, there is a lack of political representation specifically dedicated to the interests of the immigrant community.

On one hand, one could view this as a logical indication of higher levels of assimilation and integration into Belgium by these immigrant communities, many of which are in their second and third generations. In this story, these communities consider themselves Belgian and do not see a need for parties that speak to a singular dimension of their identity. On the other hand, the lack of political outlet intensifies tendencies towards extremism and radicalism, and allows those feelings to fester in un-policed and privatized networks, especially in closed neighborhoods that are over 50% Muslims.¹¹⁵ Even for those who escape these lower income neighborhoods by excelling in schools, their prospects at university are bleak. Muslims are even more of a minority at higher education institutions.¹¹⁶ Therefore, feelings of isolation and a lack of belonging are seemingly pervasive at various socio-economic levels.

It follows then that second and third generation Muslim immigrants in Belgium (the demographic that provides the most foreign fighters) have antagonistic relationships with their surroundings. As one foreign fighter put it, the “lure of extremism can be very powerful when you grow up in a world where media and everyone around you seems to mock and insult your culture.”¹¹⁷ This sense of self in relation to culture however, must be challenged. As Lisa Wedeen puts it, there is “no such thing as a self prior to social interaction: selves are produced and continually reproduced in relation to others.”¹¹⁸ These young Belgians were not born with the sense of culture they reference, but rather, like all others, it was learned. Their classification as “others” occurred as a result of deliberate Belgian state policy, with daily interactions, routines, and identifications reinforcing their self-conceptions of being Muslim. Their cultural beliefs were both thrust upon them by the state and hardened by opportunistic Islamist networks.

To these individuals, the Islamic State offers many of the elements that

¹¹⁴ Teich (2015), 18.

¹¹⁵ Koutroubas et al. (2009), 6.

¹¹⁶ Rubin (2016).

¹¹⁷ Abdelkader Benali, “The Anger of Europe’s Young Marginalized Muslims”, *New York Times* (2015).

¹¹⁸ Wedeen (2008), 182.

Belgium does not: perspective, belonging, fraternity, respect, recognition, and heroism.¹¹⁹ The Islamic State, in its promoted shows of strength, presents itself as a dominant, victorious organization.¹²⁰ Its power is seductive. Guns, salaries, jobs, brotherhood, sex, and spoils of war – all are extended by the Islamic State.¹²¹ Reporters like Katrin Bennhold have likened journeying to Syria to joining a gang – it is just another opportunity for individuals to gain respect and power.¹²²

The role of teenage angst and youth revolt is important here. Against the backdrop of Belgian secularism, conservative Islam and Salafism are the counter-culture – the hijab, a symbol of rebellion.¹²³ Being Muslim is an identity outside the boundaries of state control.¹²⁴ For teenagers and young people who feel wronged and excluded by their society, radical Islam and traveling to Syria is one way to rebel against their parents and states.¹²⁵ By rebelling, they join a group of demonstrated winners who extend to them legitimacy, status, and, most importantly, recognizable power.

Even if an individual is not actively angry and antagonistic towards the Belgian state, personal incentives, such as thrill-seeking, are still cited as motivation by foreign fighters. For many, joining the Islamic State is not so much an act of rebellion as one motivated by boredom. Compared to the complacency of everyday life, the Islamic State offers adventures.¹²⁶ For these people, “jihadi is cool” and an escape to Syria is an outlet for adventurism and thrill-seeking.¹²⁷

Individuals are incentivized to join the Islamic State for the same reasons that they would do drugs, or commit suicide.¹²⁸ Many foreign fighters travel to Syria because they are motivated by a desire to break out of the banality of every-

¹¹⁹ Rik Coolsaet, “What drives Europeans to Syria, and to IS? Insights from the Belgian Case”, *Egmont Royal Institute for International Relations Paper No. 75* (2015), 19.

¹²⁰ J.M. Berger, “How ISIS Games Twitter”, *Atlantic* (2014).

¹²¹ Don Winslow, “What ISIS Learned from the Cartels”, *Daily Beast* (2015).

¹²² Katrin Bennhold, “Jihad and Girl Power: How ISIS Lured 3 London Girls” *New York Times* (2015).

¹²³ Ibid.

¹²⁴ Nicole Falkenhayer, “The Figure of the Muslim in Europe”, *Making the British Muslim: Representations of the Rushdie Affair and Figures of the War-on-Terror Decade* (Palgrave Macmillan UK, 2014), 169.

¹²⁵ Bennhold (2015).

¹²⁶ Berger and Stern (2015).

¹²⁷ Coolsaet (2015), 17.

¹²⁸ Ibid, 18.

day life in Belgium, to see the world, and what else is out there.¹²⁹

At first glance, it is difficult to accept that thrill-seeking and adventurism is enough of a motivator to bridge the major mobilization barriers that exist. It is pertinent to ask whether or not these personal reasons are enough to push an individual to undertake the potential risks and costs of joining an organization. There surely must be another way for a young disenchanted Belgian youth to combat boredom. Therefore, a critical eye must be turned towards this narrative. At the same time, it is also important to remember that these foreign fighters have no personal experience with conflict or war. Their perception of the situation in Syria is manipulated and controlled by the Islamic State's propaganda, the romanticism of conflict, and the emphasis on heroism displayed by the media. As a result, the journey seems deceptively easy, while the resulting benefits look very alluring.

Social Focal Points

In regards to the foreign fighters, the concept of community has been re-defined. In line with the Islamic "ummah" (understood as "community of believers"), the Islamic State has attempted to export a sense of community globally.¹³⁰ The Islamic State's propaganda materials make this evident. In the first issue of "Dabiq", in a section entitled, "Glad Tidings for the Muslim Ummah," after a list of member ethnicities, it reads "Allah brought their hearts together, and thus, they became brothers... Their blood mixed and became one, under a single flag and goal... enjoying this blessing, the blessing of faithful brotherhood."¹³¹ The newsletter continues in a section labeled, "A Call to Hijrah (Emigration)" by calling all Muslims to "rush... to your state. Yes, it is your state. Rush, because Syria is not for the Syrians and Iraq is not for the Iraqis."¹³²

Intentionally, the Islamic State pushes the narrative of the ummah, a global and abstract duty that is unconstrained by nationality.¹³³ Externally, potential foreign recruits see the media's coverage of the large-scale events happening

¹²⁹ Sami Moubayed, *Under the Black Flag: At the Frontier of the New Jihad*. (I.B. Taurus, 2015), 154.

¹³⁰ Roy (2015), 10.

¹³¹ "The Return of Khilafah, *Dabiq* 1 (2014), 7.

¹³² Ibid, 11.

¹³³ Roy (2015), 10.

in the world and use these as their social focal points. In turn, their obligation for individual jihad to avenge the threatened ummah is fed.¹³⁴ By traveling to the Islamic State and fulfilling their role to the community, in many ways, foreign fighters gain access to feelings of full membership.

Patronage Networks and Quotidian Relationships

Patronage networks and quotidian relations play an even greater role in the recruitment of foreign fighters. Without local networks that allow easy access to these opportunities, individual sentiments of the disenchanted Belgian youth remain untapped. Unfortunately, in Belgium, there are deep patronage and community networks. These organizations provide the means for dissatisfied youth to travel to fight, and also protect against defection or last-minute doubts. The feelings of isolation first occur at a personal level. When individuals make contact with a specific in-group, groupthink gradually solidifies previously held personal grievances into an unquestioned system of beliefs that necessitates action.¹³⁵

The socialization process for these foreign fighters begins here, within neighborhoods like Molenbeek and Schaerbeek and organizations like Shariah-4Belgium. In these environments, personal grievances find a home and are mobilized and socialized through pre-existing networks. When first faced with the influx of Middle Eastern and Muslim immigrants, the Belgian government permitted the formation of self-contained ethnic ghettos, in which members felt no connection with the society as a whole.¹³⁶ As one Belgian government official put it, these neighborhoods have become a “little box....closed-eyes box.”¹³⁷

The privatization of religion and the government’s inability to properly fulfill its responsibilities towards this community left a convenient space that other organizations filled.¹³⁸ As religion has no place in public life in Belgium, Islam was pushed into ghettos, radicalized, and alienated.¹³⁹ Residents of Molenbeek, a city outside of Brussels that is 80% Muslim, often consider their neighborhood as set

¹³⁴ Berger and Stern (2015).

¹³⁵ Coolsaet (2015), 6.

¹³⁶ Steven Erlanger, “Blaming Policy, Not Islam, for Belgium’s Radicalized Youth”, *New York Times* (2016).

¹³⁷ Ibid.

¹³⁸ Alex Schulman, “Stockholm Syndrome: Radical Islam and the European Response,” *Human Rights Review* (2009), 481.

¹³⁹ Paul Joseph Watson, “Radicalized Muslim Ghettos Could Be Source of more Terror Attacks”, *INFOWARS* (2015).

apart from the rest of Belgium.¹⁴⁰ The city suffers from a simplistic multiculturalist understanding of space.¹⁴¹ Here, on the urban periphery and absent any long-term vision for integration and assimilation, anger towards the central state and the central Belgian identity festers.¹⁴² With the youth unemployment rate of 40%, twenty-two known mosques, and a dense population, pessimism rules in Molenbeek. Despite having been present on European soil for two or three generations and having acquired Belgian nationality, many families in Molenbeek are still considered, and consider themselves, migrants.¹⁴³

While current Islamist organizations have certainly seized the opportunities presented by this discontent, radical networks in Belgium are not new. In the 1990s, Bassam Ayachi, a Franco-Syrian former restaurant owner, founded the Belgian Islamic Center in Molenbeek.¹⁴⁴ This organization promoted the same ascetically rigid Salafism as the Islamic State. Today, these isolated neighborhoods are where organizations like Shariah4Belgium thrive.

A public and highly visible radical Salafist organization dedicated in-name to campaigning peacefully for an Islamist state, Shariah4Belgium has been linked with sending people to train militarily in Syria and Iraq.¹⁴⁵ Inspired by Shariah4UK and led by Fouad Belkacem, a second-generation Moroccan-Belgian, the organization is aimed at establishing Shariah law everywhere (Taub 2015).¹⁴⁶ However, since 2012 and following skirmishes and mayhem in the aftermath of the banning of the veil, Shariah4Belgium has been designated an illegal organization by the Belgian government. Belkacem himself is on trial for encouraging and aiding dozens of Belgian citizens to travel to Syria in order to join jihadist groups.¹⁴⁷ However, the Shariah4Belgium network continues to operate in Molenbeek and throughout Belgium with relative impunity.

¹⁴⁰ Sergio Castano Riano, "The Political Influence of Islam in Belgium", *The Open Journal of Sociopolitical Studies - Partecipazione e Conflitto* 7, no. 10 (2014), 145.

¹⁴¹ Alex Tickell, "Islamic State and the Paris Attacks: Terror, Culture and Urban Infrastructure", *Planned Violence* (2016).

¹⁴² Teich (2015), 10.

¹⁴³ Coolsaet (2015), 14.

¹⁴⁴ Higgins and de Freytas-Tamura (2016).

¹⁴⁵ James Brandon, "Belgium: Trial Uncovers Europe's Forgotten Jihadists" *The Jamestown Foundation Terrorism Monitor* 8, no. 4 (2015), 1.

¹⁴⁶ Ben Taub, "Journey to Jihad", *The New Yorker* (2015).

¹⁴⁷ Ibid.

Networks such as Shariah4Belgium are key to the high rates of transmission of Belgian foreign fighters. Belgium is the biggest per capita contributor to the foreign fighter phenomenon, with forty individuals per million population traveling to Iraq and Syria.¹⁴⁸ Shariah4Belgium creates a logical path for would-be jihadists, providing transportation and touch-points along the way.¹⁴⁹ The organization identifies and recruits individuals, socializing them in a deliberate strategy of groupthink, incubating and propagating their initial highly personal incentives. After identifying potential recruits, many with only a superficial understanding of religion, Shariah4Belgium invites them to a six month program of ideological training, dividing the world into two camps and showing videos of martyrs so as to inspire feelings of obligation and duty (Taub 2015).¹⁵⁰ This network becomes a place in which one can air personal grievances, providing disenchanted youth with the legitimacy and the tools necessary to act on feelings that previously existed to them alone.

Relationships and partnerships of jihad and shariah are formed on the streets and within the mosques of Shariah4Belgium. Shariah4Belgium politicizes the youth's previously established personal grievances, maps them onto a common and global network, and connects individuals together in a shared duty.¹⁵¹ As a result, broadly speaking, the decision to leave is an impulsive response to join a local network (that then socializes and politicizes personal preferences and grievances).¹⁵²

Ideological Commitment

When it comes to the recruitment of foreigners, ideology plays a different role. As previously discussed, one way the Islamic State uses ideology is through the active exportation of the ummah. Religion is a pretext in which recruits discuss their duty, using ideological rhetoric publicly and citing religious obligation as justification for joining the Islamic State. As Yves Goldstein, who grew up in Molenbeek and is a member of the Belgian government says, "They believe in nothing. But Islam is the way they find to express, to crystallize their radicalization."¹⁵³ Foreign

¹⁴⁸ Selina Sykes, "Belgium was warned about Molenbeek extremist hotbed 10 YEARS before Brussels attacks", *Express.co.uk* (2016).

¹⁴⁹ Birnbaum (2015).

¹⁵⁰ Taub (2015)

¹⁵¹ Coolsaet (2015), 6.

¹⁵² Ibid.

¹⁵³ Erlanger (2016).

fighters often discuss their responsibility to “protect the Muslims, their wealth, health, and religion.”¹⁵⁴ Individuals in Belgium, many of whom either were not raised Muslim or who had lapsed from the faith, have never been to Syria and are not of Syrian origin, discuss how they must do something to stop their brothers and sisters from being raped, tortured, and killed.¹⁵⁵

Through the networks of organizations like Shariah4Belgium in neighborhoods like Molenbeek, recruiters give potential recruits an ideological framework through which they can pursue their personal agendas. By using the threat to the global ummah as a rallying cry, and by giving these disenfranchised youths the language of extremism to express their personal discontent, the Islamic State has internationalized the concept of community (Hegghammer 2010/2011, 73).¹⁵⁶

Finally, many foreign fighters have a history of delinquency, drug use, and living in sinful opposition to Islam. For example, Salah Abdelsalem, the mastermind of the Paris attacks, is a former drug dealer and onetime bar owner who committed to an ascetic life just prior to his involvement in the attack.¹⁵⁷ For individuals like this, the opportunity to start over and to regain religious authority and salvation is attractive. They have sinned in the past, they have not lived the life of good Muslims, and they now have the opportunity to start over whilst simultaneously fulfilling personal desires.¹⁵⁸

CONCLUSION

The study of the literature and the application of incentive systems scholarship to the Islamic State makes evident that there are many different motivations that push participation at both a local and international level. The Islamic State's slogan is *baqiya wa tatamadad*, which translates to “lasting and expanding.”¹⁵⁹ The only way that Islamic State can fulfill this objective is to continue to moti-

¹⁵⁴ Robert Mackey, “A Dutch ISIS Fighter Takes Question on Tumblr”, *New York Times*, (2015).

¹⁵⁵ Adam Goldman, “An American family saved their son from joining the Islamic State. Now he might go to prison” *Washington Post*, (2015).

¹⁵⁶ Thomas Hegghammer, “The Rise of Muslim Foreign Fighters” *International Security* 35 n. 3 (2010/2011), 73.

¹⁵⁷ Higgins and de Freytas-Tamura (2016).

¹⁵⁸ Ami Khan, “Al Qaeda's New Front: Jihadi Rap” *POLITO Magazine* (2014).

¹⁵⁹ Lina Khatib, “Why ISIS Keeps Expanding” *Carnegie Middle East Center* (2015).

vate participation. In confronting the collective action problem, the Islamic State adapts previously identified incentives, orienting them differently towards each audience

In this study, I have attempted to present a more complete picture of why local Syrians engage in, at the least, basic complicity with the Islamic State. Yet, I want to reaffirm a note of caution that I sounded in the introduction. For all intents and purposes, Raqqa is an unknown quantity. The information available is limited at best and any information is biased - either released by the Islamic State itself or by defectors who, because of feelings of complicity or personal guilt, have incentives to manipulate their narratives. Hopefully, the situation de-escalates soon. When this occurs, on-the-ground dynamics should be re-assessed.

The wide global audience (made even wider by the Internet and social media) is a large population of untapped potential for the Islamic State, but with it comes a unique burden and challenge to the mobilization narratives and incentive system. In response to the questions “Why should I fight and die for you? Why should I join you when the costs of participation are so high relative to the tangible costs of non-participation?”, the Islamic State must fashion a new answer.¹⁶⁰ The Islamic State mobilizes individual level incentives, tapping into personal grievances, local motivations and networks, and presenting itself as the most worthwhile alternative to a boring life. It promises not only salvation in the afterlife, but also salvation from the malaise of current life. In this paper, I aimed to present an overview of mechanisms pushing participation at the international level. However, more work must be done in this regard. The intentions of these adolescents who leave safety to fight and die are unknowable and impossible to generalize.

Regardless, the simplistic narrative about ideological radicalization must be avoided. A simplified understanding and hardening of the “us versus them” sentiment reinforces the in-group bias being socialized within these disenfranchised teenagers. For these foreigners, reasons for mobilization are often grounded in their experience back at home – in Belgium and in the rest of the West. I encourage further research into how historical tendencies in Belgium, as well as the nation’s initial response to the alarming rate of Belgian foreign fighter transmission, have impacted mobilization.

With this project, I hope to demonstrate that no part of the Syrian conflict is static. Terms like “membership”, “culture”, and “order” fluctuate and are

¹⁶⁰ Vinci (2006), 51.

re-defined as conditions change. An incentive that may function one day in one capacity may be rendered unimportant the next. Therefore, I urge other scholars to maintain a constant study of the mechanisms at play for they are constantly in flux.

Finally, while this project focused on the Islamic State, the active role and continued brutality of the Assad regime should not and cannot be ignored. The emergence of the Islamic State and the incentives to which it appeals were not created in a vacuum. Especially in Raqqa, the regime is responsible for many the openings of which the Islamic State takes advantage. Building off of what I have tried to do in this project, future studies must address the role that the state plays.

The death toll in Syria is placed as high as almost half a million, with the rate of killing escalating each year (Taub 2016).¹⁶¹ Brutality and anarchy has hollowed out the country, with nearly 5 million Syrians displaced externally (Taub 2016).¹⁶² This conflict is not isolated to the region; it has entangled the world. Understanding the Islamic State's ability to last and expand is one of many steps necessary to effectively respond to the conflict.

¹⁶¹ Taub (2016).

¹⁶² Ibid.

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