



Critical review

The emerging Islamic State: Terror, territoriality, and the agenda of social transformation



Yosef Jabareen

Urban Planning and Politics, Faculty of Architecture and Town Planning, Technion – Israel Institute of Technology, 33855 Haifa, Israel

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ABSTRACT

The world has recently been witness to the emergence of a new contemporary geopolitical phenomenon: the declaration of Islamic States by specific Islamic organizations. This phenomenon has the potential to dramatically transform the geopolitical setting of the Middle East and to have farreaching effects on a global level. Of these most prominent, however, has undoubtedly been the June 2014 declaration by the “Islamic State” organization of a “caliphate” covering large areas of the two war-torn states of Syria and Iraq. The aim of this article is to interrogate the territorial aspects of the Islamic State and to discern what makes it unique and exceptional in comparison to the many other Islamic political organizations that have emerged in recent years. In order to facilitate a better understanding of territoriality, I distinguish here between two major dimensions: conceptions of territoriality and tactics of territoriality. My working assumption is that by distinguishing between conceptions and tactics of territoriality, we can compare the exercise of territoriality by states and, in the present case, organizations. In this article, I argue that the Islamic State poses a challenge to both the conceptual and tactical dimensions of the contemporary territory and territoriality of modern states. Yet, while its conception of territoriality may be widely shared by other political Islamic organizations, its uniqueness lies in its tactics and strategies. Indeed, it is the brutal tactics of the Islamic State that are less acceptable to many Muslims around the world, not its political conception, which enjoys considerable support in the Muslim arena. Yet, when comparing it with modern states, the Islamic State poses a challenge to the territory and territoriality in both conception and tactics.

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E-mail address: [jabareen@technion.ac.il](mailto:jabareen@technion.ac.il)

## Introduction

The world has recently bore witness to the emergence of a new contemporary geopolitical phenomenon: the declaration of Islamic States by specific Islamic organizations. This phenomenon has the potential to dramatically transform the geopolitical settings of the Middle East and to have far-reaching effects on a global level. Examples include the Taliban's proclamation of a state subject to Sharia law in Afghanistan in the 1990s, Hamas's rule in the Gaza Strip since 2006, and Boko Haram's declaration of an Islamic caliphate in Nigeria in 2014. Most prominent, however, has undoubtedly been the June 2014 declaration by the "Islamic State" organization (previously known as the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant, or ISIL, or the Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham, or ISIS) of a "caliphate" covering large areas of the two war-torn states of Syria and Iraq. Originally established in 2006, the Islamic State enjoys widespread popularity among large numbers of Muslims in Europe, the Middle East, and other Muslim countries. The Islamic State has been the most powerful organization of this kind to emerge thus far, and its territorial successes and sheer brutality have attracted wide international attention.

The aim of this article is to interrogate the territorial aspects of the Islamic State and to discern what makes it unique and exceptional in comparison to the many other Islamic political organizations that have emerged in recent years. This article focuses on the Islamic State due the scale of its undertaking and the extreme nature of its excessive terror and its territorial and social practices.

By "territory," we mean a bounded space that has had "something done to it" – that "has been acted upon" (Cowen and Gilbert, 2008: 16). Territoriality, on the other hand, refers to a social and spatial process that "assigns identities for collective subjects within structures of power" and that categorizes them in a manner "that is only possible if other forms of the subject are violently or peacefully removed, coercively or voluntarily destroyed" (Balibar, 2004). Territoriality utilizes this bordered space, or "territory," to achieve the social control, classification, symbolic representation, communication, inclusion, and exclusion of people and things (Sack, 1986: 21–34). Territoriality can also be a blunt and distorting instrument that serves as an ideological mask for the interests of dominant people, factions, or classes (Anderson and Shuttleworth, 2007; Paasi, 2003). This article is based on the premise that territoriality produces sociospatial spaces, which are political and "populated with ideologies", and far from being "merely a physical container" (Brenner, 1999; Lefebvre, 1991).

In order to facilitate a better understanding of territoriality for the sake of this article, I distinguish here between two major dimensions of territoriality: *conceptions of territoriality and tactics of territoriality*. My working assumption is that by distinguishing between conceptions and tactics of territoriality, we can compare the exercise of territoriality by states and, in the present case, organizations. A conception of territoriality refers to the manner in which states and all other political entities conceive of territoriality. Such representations of territoriality are always abstract and ideational and they subsume ideology and knowledge, which are projected onto social reality and territory in order to transform it. It is what Lefebvre (1991) proposes as a 'conceived space' or conceptualized space which is "a place for the practices of social and political power" and "in essence, it is these spaces that are designed to manipulate those who exist within them" (Lefebvre, 1991, p. 222). The second is *the tactical dimension*, which is about the tactics used in order to achieve the conceived territoriality. It primarily reflects the subordination of resources to political ends, with the aim of shaping, producing, reproducing, and controlling specific territories.

In this article, I argue that the Islamic State poses a challenge to both the conceptual and tactical dimensions of the contemporary

territory and territoriality of modern states. Yet, while its conception of territoriality may be widely shared by other political Islamic organizations, its uniqueness lies in its tactics and strategies. Indeed, it is the brutal tactics of the Islamic State that are less acceptable to many Muslims around the world, not its political conception, which enjoys considerable support in the Muslim arena.

## Methods

The data consulted for our exploration of the territorial agenda of the Islamic State are based primarily on the organization's official Arabic-language material published on its website. Use here of the original material in Arabic, my native language, is meant to ensure contextual authenticity and to avoid misrepresentation. For the most part, this article uses the data of the al-Furqan Institute for Media Production, "the primary media production center for the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria," which was founded in November 2006, shortly after the establishment of the organization itself (Roggio, 2007). Due to the contentiousness and controversy surrounding the Islamic State, I have made a concerted effort to critically examine and validate the material analyzed in order to avoid misrepresentation. One of the major Arabic language documents analyzed in this article is the "Declaration of the Islamic State."<sup>1</sup>

### *The Islamic State's conception of territoriality*

Our analysis of the territoriality of the Islamic State can be broken down into the following three major themes:

#### *The imagined Ummah and the return of the caliphate*

The Islamic State invokes a specific utopian imagination of the resurrection of the Muslim *ummah* (nation) and the Caliphate (Islamic empire). It rejects the modern nation state and the states created during the colonial period and instead calls for a return of the Caliphate of the Islamic *ummah*, which transcends nationalism and race. In this context, thousands of Muslim "Jihadists" from around the world have joined together to take part in establishing a new "Islamic State" with a social, territorial, and political agenda. The Islamic State regards the period of the first Caliphate in Islamic history, or the *Rashidun* (Arabic for "rightly guided") Caliphate, which emerged after the death of Mohammad the Prophet in 632 and lasted until 661, as an ideal political regime representing the true spirit of Islam. This initial caliphate was followed in continuous succession by many others, the last of which was the Ottoman Caliphate, which was established in 1452 and terminated in 1924 in the wake of WWI (Hitti, 1961; Rafi, 2014). For thirteen hundreds years, "Islamic governments ruled states that ranged from fortified towns to transcontinental empires," and that, "separated in time, space, and size, were so Islamic that they did not need the adjective to describe themselves" (Feldman, 2008: 1).

The Declaration of the Islamic State proclaims that "indeed, Allah honored the *ummah* of Muhammad and blessed it, making it the greatest *ummah* of all peoples" (p. 2). This *ummah* "does not accept submission to anyone or anything other than Allah" and "accepts neither transgression nor oppression" (p. 3). Rather, "it is an honorable and noble *ummah* that does not sleep or ignore grievance and does not accept degradation" (p. 3). This *ummah*, furthermore, bears the mission of filling "the earth with justice after it has been filled with oppression and tyranny" (p. 4). For many years, the Declaration recounts, this *ummah* has forgotten its obligation and "has not tasted honor since it was lost," although

<sup>1</sup> <http://botshikan.wordpress.com/2014/06/30/>.

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