

Talibanization of the Islamic State and the Quest for Retrospective Legitimacy

by

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Abstract:

This paper develops the notion of ‘Talibanization’ a concept which stems from the resilience and the determination of the Taliban to remain a dominant player in Afghanistan even after the downfall of their state in 2001. The factors that helped the Taliban to maintain their influence after the disintegration of their state constitute a pattern which could be applied to other conflict-driven areas such as Syria. By critically examining the socio-political conditions in the district of Jarablus, this paper demonstrates the ways in which the inept post-IS administration is inadvertently helping IS to gain what we call ‘retrospective legitimacy’ a drive which could sustain its influence for many years following its downfall.

1. Introduction

As the Islamic State (IS) was rapidly conquering territory in Iraq and Syria, questions were raised about the future of these regions after the demise of IS. By 2016, IS was no longer indomitable and in 2018 the self-proclaimed Caliphate lost all its territories in Iraq and Syria. A coalition of local, regional and global forces brought the once ‘unbeatable’ trans-national Jihadi organization to its knees. Although these victories were followed by a sense of military triumphalism, there is enough evidence to suggest that these territorial losses, by no means, constitute the end of IS.

The wider region has seen a lot of premature military triumphalism, which could be said to have misframed the prevailing socio-political realities on the ground. Perhaps the best example is the military victory proclaimed against the Taliban in Afghanistan, which led to the selection of Hamid

Karzai as the head of the Afghan Interim Administration at the Bonn Conference in December 2001. However, by 2003 the former Taliban leader Mullah Omar had re-organized his movement and had launched an effective insurgency against the government and ISAF.

Over the last 16 years \$2 trillion has been spent in Afghanistan and despite widespread Western support for the central government in Kabul, the Taliban remains one of the most important movers and shakers in Afghan politics.¹ This study asks the pressing question whether the same fate is now awaiting IS? Is the current military downfall of IS merely creating the fire under the ashes of defeat?

IS has been subject to a rapid transition during its short history. As an offshoot of Al-Qaeda, it established a form of territorial governance, designated a “Caliphate”. The Caliphate phase portrayed IS as one of the most effective sub-state actors in the region, with the ability to challenge the post-WWI state model and govern over 10 million people. Although this phase was important in shaping the narratives and the identity of the organization, it was short-lived. However, with rapid military defeat and territorial losses, the organization has now entered a new phase.

By critically examining the evidence on the ground this paper suggests that emerging conditions in areas, which were once governed by IS can set the stage for a new chapter that we call the ‘Talibanization’ phase.

We are redefining the notion of Talibanization, a concept sparked by the resilience and the persistence of Taliban to remain as a shadow state after their military defeat in 2001. We suggest that some legitimacy-related factors which helped the Taliban to maintain their influence after their military defeat constitute a pattern which can be applied to other conflict-driven regions such as Syria. We recognise that alongside the similarities between the Taliban in Afghanistan and IS in Syria one should not overlook the differences between the two cases. Although we suggest the right

¹ Sahadi Jeanne, “The Financial Cost of 16 Years in Afghanistan,” CNN Money, August 22, 2017, <http://money.cnn.com/2017/08/21/news/economy/war-costs-afghanistan/index.html>.

conditions are in place for the Talibanization of IS, we acknowledge the difference between Taliban and IS and the uniqueness of the socio-political landscapes they both operated in. One major difference is the social composition of both groups as Taliban represents an indigenous Pashtun-based movement operating mainly in Pashtun-dominated areas whereas IS was highly dominated by foreign fighters. No doubt this fact makes gaining popular support relatively easier for the coherent Taliban in comparison to IS which was distracted in some areas by frictions between locals and foreigners. However, being easier for the Taliban does not make it impossible for IS.

Indeed, the full comparison between IS and the Taliban which requires a separate investigation may lead to significant outcomes, but this paper does not aim to compare the case of the Taliban with IS or even compare Afghanistan with Syria. It rather focuses on the functionality of one factor which we call “retrospective legitimacy”. This among other factors have played a significant role in the survival of the Taliban and can represent a pattern that might be applied to other cases including IS in Syria.

Since 1994, the Taliban has been one of the most important political actors in Afghanistan and this unique status could not be gained without substantial grassroots supporters who see them as a better alternative to their successors who are widely perceived as corrupt and incompetent. The United States, the most powerful country in the world, has spent trillions of dollars in support of the Kabul government and yet this government remains fragile and largely ineffective. Hence, the role of the external actors should not be overstated, and more attention should be given to structural factors which have made the Taliban resilient in Afghanistan and could set the stage for the revival of IS in Syria.

In this paper, Talibanization refers to the process by which an insurgency organization, with short-lived territorial governing experience, manages to

gain legitimacy due to the public perception of the inadequacy of the succeeding administration. An inadequacy demonstrated by a failure to provide security and other essential services. A growing sense of disillusionment with the new order constitutes what we call 'retrospective legitimacy' for the previous rulers, who are perceived to have delivered better services and provided more security. We conceptualize this as a zero-sum game of the acquisition of legitimacy. This is a situation by which each contestant's gain or loss of legitimacy is balanced by the losses or gains of the legitimacy of the previous contestant. Hence, as the new administration fails to deliver both security and other basic services, subjects as such develop increasingly positive attitudes towards the previous order, which despite all its major shortcomings is perceived to have provided a better sense of security and certitude.

Therefore, we argue that Talibanization implies the politics of remembrance. It entails collective remembrance of a time representing relative certainty and stability. In extreme situations, the perception of stability, security, and transparency is more relative than the peacetime and if there is a period, which is remembered as being relatively more stable, then the population is more likely to view this time more favorably.

This paper critically assesses whether *retrospective legitimacy* and the *Talibanization* of the IS in Syria is a likely scenario. In this light, we have chosen the district of Jarablus as our case study to evaluate popular attitudes towards IS after their military defeat. The district of Jarablus is located on the western bank of the river Euphrates in northern Syria. It is located 130 kilometers north east of the main city of Aleppo, adjacent to the Syrian-Turkish border and the Turkish town of Karkamış. IS took the full control of Jarablus in early 2014 and enforced its strict laws in compliance with their interpretation of Islamic Sharia law. By instituting brutal mechanisms of social control, IS became an indisputable force until it was removed by the 'Euphrates Shield' operations in August 2016.

Turkey stepped in using its affiliated groups to take over the area before the arrival of the Syrian Democratic Forces, a Kurdish dominated group perceived as a terrorist organization by the Turkish government. Since its liberation from IS, the district of Jarablus and its neighbouring cities have been governed by local administrative councils affiliated to Turkey in conjunction with rebel factions of the Free Syrian Army (FSA) working under the umbrella of the Turkish-supported Euphrates Shield forces. This makes Jarablus a good case study because it has experienced both IS and post-IS administrations for four years.

This paper begins by briefly conceptualizing both legitimacy and good governance which are essential tools to assess our proposed notion of Talibanization. The following section re-defines the notion of Talibanization which is the conceptual backbone of this study. The main analytical part of the paper will be the case study section which assesses the evidence on the ground shedding light on the prevailing socio-political realities of post-IS life in Jarablus.

Methodology

This research relies heavily on primary data, collected through interviews with native informants in Jarablus. However, given the security challenges in this area, it was difficult to conduct the interviews in person. In this light, nine semi-structured interviews were conducted via online communication tools in Arabic and then transcribed into English. Employing semi-structured interviews warranted a greater flexibility in terms of letting respondents develop their ideas and also allowing for more discussion.

Through these organic discussions, we got a better insight into both life under IS and into the post-liberation socio-economic conditions in Jarablus district. Furthermore, semi-structured interviews afforded the informants the opportunity to express their ideas in their own words. The interviewees were approached through a snowballing method. We used local contacts to initiate the initial calls. All interviewees are Sunni Arabs, except Mahmood

who introduced himself as a Kurdish Sunni. Four interviewees are originally from the main city of Jarablus, while the rest are from countryside connected to the city. They have various occupations in the community and different educational backgrounds. Our sample includes highly educated individuals such as dentists and school principals as well as those who have manual jobs, such as farming.

Although we actively attempted to have a more representative and gender-balanced sample, it was not possible to have a wider group of interviewees. The current security situation is tense, and many people declined our request, because they were afraid of consequences. The safety and security of the interviewees were taken into consideration in all cases and accordingly in this article, in order to protect their identity, all the names have been changed to assure the anonymity of the interviewees. Although these informants provide valuable insight into the issues central to this research project, the authors use a variety of other materials, particularly Arabic sources to complement the interviews.

2. IS Governance and the Legitimacy Challenge

At its peak in 2015, IS was considered as the most powerful sub-state insurgency actor in the world as it controlled large swathes of territory in northern Syria and western Iraq. The group's efforts to establish a 'de facto' Islamic state put a spotlight on many critical matters relating to Jihadism and state building.² Given that none of the other Jihadist organizations captured territory or controlled resources in such a way, IS was viewed as an unprecedented phenomenon.³ However, the organization's rigid religious outlook insisting on certain interpretations of the Sharia law and its violent practices made their quest to gain legitimacy a difficult task.

² Laub Zachary. "The Islamic State." *Council on Foreign Relations 16" Updated August 10, (2016),* <https://www.cfr.org/backgrounder/islamic-state.;>

Lia Brynjar. "Understanding jihadi Proto-States." *Perspectives on Terrorism* 9, no. 4 (August 2015): 31-41.

³ Lia, "Understanding jihadi,": 31.

Heißner Stefan, Peter R. Neumann, John Holland-McCowan, and Rajan Basra. "Caliphate in Decline: An Estimate of Islamic State's Financial Fortunes." *The International Centre for The Study of Radicalization and Political Violence*, (2017).

Gartenstein-Ross and Magen argue that Jihadist groups such as IS face an internal test of legitimacy which concerns the acceptance of the group by the subject population, and an external test which concerns the group's positioning within the international community.⁴ As external legitimacy was not an option for IS due to its inflexibility and its portrayal of the international system per se as 'illegitimate', its sole source of legitimacy lay in the group's acceptance by the population it ruled.

Examining IS' quest to gain legitimacy requires deeper conceptualization of political legitimacy. Max Weber's account of legitimacy might be dated, yet it remains a good point of departure. Weber defines legitimacy as a binding relationship between the ruler and the ruled population in which the former is perceived as having the 'right' to be obeyed.⁵ Weber states that authorities can enjoy three types of political legitimacy. Firstly, there is traditional legitimacy built on customs, blood ties, religious beliefs, etc. In this approach, social learning is extremely important in explaining loyalty to rulers. Secondly, there is charismatic legitimacy which draws on the personality and the ideas of a charismatic figure and his relationship with his followers. Thirdly, rational-legal legitimacy which is a process-based legitimacy by which people are elevated to serve specific roles.⁶ Weber described this base as the most highly- rational and linked it to modern bureaucratic systems. He also emphasizes that an authority should gain legitimacy through consent and mutual understanding, compliance and not coercion.⁷ This assumption had been laid down by earlier thinkers like Jean-Jacques Rousseau.⁸ Drawing on these categories of legitimacy, it is easy to argue that IS hardly qualifies as a legitimate actor during its ruling period as it relied heavily on violent mechanisms of social control which systematically eliminated any dissent.

⁴ Gartenstein-Ross Daveed, and Amichai Magen. "The Jihadist Governance Dilemma." *The Monkey Cage* 18 (2014).

⁵ Hermann Donald HJ. "Max Weber and the Concept of Legitimacy in Contemporary Jurisprudence." *DePaul Law Review* 33, no. (1) (1983): 1.

⁶ Hermann, "Max Weber,".

⁷ Hermann, "Max Weber,".

⁸ Rousseau Jean-Jacques. "*The Social Contract: & Discourses*,". No. 660. JM Dent & Sons, (1920).

Although Weber is often the frame of reference for discussions regarding political legitimacy, his findings are not conclusive. Yu (2011) examined the legitimacy crisis faced by Western countries and emphasized the idea that traditional sources of legitimacy such as blood ties and religious beliefs and are no longer valid sources of legitimacy. Instead, legitimacy is claimed through “good governance” which is the main source of legitimacy for human societies in the 21st century.⁹

Good governance as defined by Yu is the cooperative management of public interests by both government and citizens and it has eight following essential characteristics: rule of law, participation, fairness, transparency, accountability, efficiency, stability, and integrity.¹⁰ A closer look at the ideology-based governance of the IS reveals that a full compatibility to the characteristics of good governance was not possible due to the following two factors. Firstly, the group’s oppression of the civil society and their narrow definition of the public sphere undermines the participation element.¹¹ Secondly, the group’s strict rules which were based on a pre-modern value system undermines equality for people of different gender and religious belief which undercuts the fairness element.¹²

No doubt making a verdict on the remaining elements requires deeper investigation. However, our findings through interviews coupled with other available data on IS governance reveals that IS was to some extent compatible with certain characteristics of good governance, mainly because of the relative stability the group provided in comparison to other sub-state groups.

⁹ Yu Keping. "Good governance and legitimacy." In *China's Search for Good Governance*, Palgrave Macmillan US, (2011): 15-21.

¹⁰ Yu Keping. "Introduction: Governance and Good Governance." *Marxism and Reality* 5 (1999): 37-41.

¹¹ Khalaf, Rana. "Governance without government in Syria: Civil society and state building during the conflict." *Syria Studies* 7, no. 3 (2015): 37-72.

¹² Caris Charles C., and Samuel Reynolds. "ISIS Governance in Syria." *Middle East Security Report* 22 (2014): 4-41.

Indeed, IS exemplified a relatively successful example of capacity-related governance which relates to the provision of basic services and security. This is particularly true in the early days when IS captured new territories. The group dealt with the restoration of basic services (water, electricity, bread, etc) and offering them initially for free as its top priority in order to win the hearts and minds of residents.¹³ The deployment of police forces and combating crimes initiated the perception that the group is here to provide the missing protection.¹⁴ Although the group's capacity to offer these services was negatively impacted by the military pressure on the group and the fact that it deviated part of its sources to prepare high profile terrorist attacks, it maintained a better position in comparison to other non-state actors. Indeed, across Syria's non-government areas, IS was the most capable group in providing key goods and services to its subjects.¹⁵ This can be attributed to its well-structured institutions which were backed by massive resources.¹⁶

Many locals benefited from the services provided by IS and the new economic cycles which were created under its rule. Hence, as our interviewees suggested, should people have to choose between IS and its alternatives, a significant portion would opt for IS despite their ideology and violent extremism. The finding of this research suggest that people believed that IS proved that they can provide some essential services to them. In other words, by providing social services to its subjects, IS enjoyed voluntary support beyond coercion-based compliance.

Another source of capacity-related legitimacy lies in IS's provision of security. In post-conflict situations, people often prioritize security. In many areas in Syria, IS was perceived as the sole bulwark against the chaos

¹³ Revkin, Mara and McCants, Willian. "Experts Weigh In: IS ISIS Good at Governing?,". Brookings. November 20, 2015 & Armacanqui, Eric. "Building the Caliphate: Insight into the Islamic State's Governance and Bureaucracy,". The University of Minnesota. May 6, 2016

¹⁴ Jackson, Maia Brown. "An Account of Fact & Fiction Regarding ISIS Governance,". Islamic Theology for Counter Terrorism.

¹⁵ Khalaf Rana. "Beyond Arms and Beards: Local Governance of ISIS in Syria." *Caliphate and Islamic Global Politics*, January 7 (2015), <http://www.e-ir.info/2015/01/07/beyond-arms-and-beards-local-governance-of-isis-in-syria/>.

¹⁶ Khalaf, "Beyond Arms,".

created by the conflict and state failure. The group treated security on the ground very seriously, using extreme violence to ensure its maintenance. It managed to appeal to people by eliminating other armed groups characterized by looting and corruption. By following a rigid set of rules and promoting Sharia courts, IS was also to some extent perceived as an “incorrupt” sub-state group.¹⁷

This is not to completely disassociate IS from corruption as its members reportedly engaged in corrupt activities when the group started to spin out of control. The offensive anti-IS campaign and the subsequent crippling economy made IS unable to maintain its high moral standards as its officials started to misconduct and engage in corrupt activities which undermined the group’s “purported commitment to accountability and justice”.¹⁸ No doubt this deviation shifted many people’s preferences away from IS as people’s attitudes towards the group were determined by changing reference points including the relative comparison between the group and the other available alternatives.¹⁹ However, it should be noted that this deviance from obeying the legality and accountability of the group occurred at a later stage amid some level of instability and after the image of the group as a less corrupt organization was already cemented.

In addition, as our interviews and some other sources show, IS exploited public anger against corruption to position itself as antidote through its public narratives despite its own corrupt activities.²⁰ (This will be elaborated upon later). For instance, people preferred IS governance to Jabhat Al-Nusra (Al-Nusra front) governance in Deir ez-Zor despite the latter’s capacity to provide public services and security just because of the perception that IS was known for “integrity”.²¹ In short, IS exemplified, during its ruling period, a good example of capacity-related governance.

¹⁷ Khalaf, “Beyond Arms,”.

¹⁸ Revkin Mara, “The Legal Foundations of the Islamic State,” Brookings, Analysis Paper No 23, July, 2016.

¹⁹ Revkin, Mara and McCants, Willian, ““Experts Weigh In: IS ISIS Good at Governing?,”.

²⁰ Kavakeb Dominic, “ISIS Cannot Be Defeated Without Addressing Corrupt Conditions In Which They Thrive,” Transparency International, February 21, 2017, <http://www.transparency.org.uk/press-releases/isis-cannot-be-defeated-without-addressing-corrupt-conditions-in-which-they-thrive/>.

²¹ Khalaf, “Beyond Arms,”.

Yet, the group's legitimacy was far-fetched due to its coercive policies and strict ideology.

As the international campaign to eradicate IS was fierce leading to the collapse of the group, two legitimacy-related issues should not be overlooked. Firstly, the effect of the operations of the global coalition against IS on the group's internal legitimacy. Many locals viewed IS terrorist activities as responsible for attracting the coalition's airstrikes and therefore they increased their resistance to the group. This was highly likely in situations where IS used the civilians as human shields as happened during the liberation of Raqqa and the city of Manbij in northern Syria.²² Nonetheless, some segments of the society were manipulated by IS which used the coalition's indiscriminate airstrikes to prove its narrative regarding the carelessness of the international community about the lives of civilians. IS portrayed itself alongside the civilians as being together the victims of the coalition's operations. Hence, local activists on the ground warned that the coalition's operations boosted the legitimacy of IS as many locals also suffered in these attacks.²³ In this respect, it can be argued that the international community did not pay enough attention to protecting civilians under the siege from IS. Therefore, IS was perceived to be the only provider of security to many locals.²⁴

Secondly, one has to look at reverberations of IS public narratives and its strategies towards ruled people and the ways in which it influenced the group's legitimacy. During its ruling era, IS invested heavily in marketing its version of the Islamic State to minimize its ideological distance from its subjects.²⁵ In doing so, IS resorted to the politics of nostalgia through

²² Amnesty International, "I Won't Forget This Carnage: Civilians Trapped in Battle for Raqqa," 2017. See also Sidahmed Mazin, "Isis appears to use civilians as human shields to flee Syrian town," The Guardian, August 19, 2016. Available: <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/aug/19/isis-civilians-syria-manbij-human-shield>.

²³ Khalaf, "Beyond Arms,".

²⁴ Hassan Hassan "What the Isis Jihadis Lose in Strength from the Air Strikes They May Gain in Legitimacy," The Guardian, September 28, 2014, <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2014/sep/28/what-isis-loses-strength-air-strikes-gain-legitimacy>.

²⁵ Gambhir Harleen K. "Dabiq: The Strategic Messaging of the Islamic State." *Institute for the Study of War* 15 (2014).

producing religious, political, and military arguments thus manipulating the grievances of Muslims, providing a new sense of belonging and purpose to disillusioned people and reviving nostalgia for the glorious Islamic empire.²⁶ While the short-term impact of IS rhetoric towards locals was already tested, its long-term impact remains unclear. Our findings suggest that the failure to build new models of governance that satisfy peoples' basic needs, could frame IS as a more capable and legitimate group in long-term in the minds of those who were exposed to IS intensive narratives and propagandas. In other words, the kind of legitimacy IS could not achieve in power, maybe gained by them after their departure, duplicating the Taliban's scenario in Afghanistan.

3. On Talibanization

The notion of Talibanization already exists and it refers to Islamist state or sub-state actors emulating the strict practices of the Taliban.²⁷ Often the ideology or practices of these actors are compared to the extremist interpretation of Islam which were implemented during the time of the Taliban in Afghanistan.²⁸ Talibanization is often used in a pejorative way and refers to the empowerment of fundamentalist actors who seek to enforce ultraconservative socio-cultural policies in accordance to the austere principles of Islam.²⁹ Although adherence to strict interpretation of Islam is an important feature of the Taliban era, it does not shed light on other critical factors which helped the Taliban to maintain their influence after the collapse of their state . Hence, there is room for radical development of the concept.

Our notion of Talibanization originates from the dogged determination of the Taliban to remain a dominant player in Afghanistan even after the downfall of their state in 2001. Some of the factors that helped the Taliban

²⁶ Shahi Afshin. *The Politics of Truth Management in Saudi Arabia*. (Routledge, 2013), 119.

²⁷ Talibanization, Oxford Dictionary, 8 January 2018
<https://en.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/talibanization>

²⁸ Syed Fazl-e-Haider , Malala versus Extremism: Not Taliban, but Talibanization, *Harvard International Review* 34, no. 4 (2013):73-76

²⁹ N. J. DEMERATH, The Pitfalls of Pluralism: Talibanization and Saffronization in India, *Harvard International Review* 25, no. 4 (2004): 16-19

to maintain their influence after the disintegration of their state constitute a pattern which could be applied to other conflict-driven areas like Syria. In this light, we refer to Talibanization as a process by which an insurgency organization with a track record of territorial governance manages to maintain or increase its influence even after it is defeated militarily.

Talibanization refers to the process by which an insurgency organization with short-lived territorial governing experience can acquire legitimacy due to the public perception of its successor as ineffectual in delivering critical services, security, and transparency.

In other words, Talibanization refers to a zero-sum game of the acquisition of legitimacy. This is a situation in which a gain for one side causes a corresponding loss for the other side. In other words, as the successor fails to provide essential services, security and transparency, people increasingly develop positive attitudes towards the previous order which despite all its deficiencies it perceived to have had the capacity to provide better services.

In this light, Talibanization entails the politics of remembrance. It is a collective remembrance of a past period representing more certainty and stability. In extreme times, the perception of stability and security are more relative than in peace time and if there is a period which is remembered as relatively more stable, people are more likely to see it as having greater legitimacy. We call this 'retrospective legitimacy'.

This notion of retrospective legitimacy has been already tested in Afghanistan in the post-Taliban period. Despite the brutalities of the Taliban during their time in power, the chaos and corruption that emerged after their fall provided a groundswell of support for the group. This corrupt and ineffective regime in the post-Taliban phase immensely contributed to the survival and resilience of the group.³⁰

³⁰ Goodhand, Jonathan. "Corrupting or Consolidating the Peace? The Drugs Economy and Post-Conflict Peacebuilding in Afghanistan." *International Peacekeeping* 15, no. 3 (2008): 405-423.

Indeed, there is a link between capacity related governance and legitimacy in the post-conflict phases which does not only affect the existing ruling order but touches all competing forces. In other words, the failure in providing good governance, enforcing security, and controlling corruption in post-conflict societies not only undermines the legitimacy of the ruling regime but simultaneously boosts the legitimacy of other competing parties.³¹

Such a scenario becomes more likely if the competing groups are perceived to have had a track record of 'superior' models of governance. This argument proved true in Afghanistan. Before the period of the Taliban rule, war economy was a major aspect of life in Afghanistan, particularly with the rise of the drug industry and the transformation of the economy from subsistence agriculture to commerce.³² This war economy gave rise to excessive corruption whereby warlords gained control of the available resources.³³ In 1994 the Taliban emerged in a climate which was hardened by criminality, corruption, and lawlessness and their efforts to restore relative order helped them to attract grassroots supporters particularly in the south.³⁴ This atmosphere imbued by lawlessness paved the way to a new coalition between the Taliban and the merchant classes whose interests had been undermined by chaos. Despite the extreme brutality demonstrated by the Taliban administration criminality and corruption were significantly reduced.

Hence, it is not surprising that after their forced ejection from the power at the end of 2001, the Taliban managed to re-emerge and expanded a shadow state as a parallel power structure. In addition to external factors such as the critical assistance of Pakistan who provided the group with training camps, sanctuary and funds, Afghan's frustration towards the official government and the 'superiority' of the Taliban rule in their eyes

³¹ Goodhand, Jonathan. "Corrupting or Consolidating the Peace," 405-423.

³²Rubin Barnett R. "Saving Afghanistan." *Foreign affairs* (2007): 57-78.

³³ Snyder, Richard. "Does Lootable Wealth Breed Disorder? A Political Economy of Extraction Framework." *Comparative Political Studies* 39, no. 8 (2006): 943-968.

³⁴ Goodhand, "Corrupting or Consolidating the Peace", 405-423

played a major role in the revival of the Taliban.³⁵ In many Afghans' view, the Taliban successfully brought security to their governed territories that had previously been mired in conflict for a long time.³⁶ Moreover, many describe the Taliban's rule as rapid and tough justice for criminals and murderers.³⁷

In many areas, people preferred the Taliban's swift but flawed system of justice to that of its successor which was riddled with cronyism and corruption.³⁸ In other words, the Taliban's rule was viewed by many Afghans as a protection against the corrupt official government in Afghanistan.³⁹ According to a report compiled by the Afghanistan Research and Evaluation Unit in 2011, governance-associated critical problems such as corruption have reportedly cemented the position of the Taliban as a parallel power structure.⁴⁰

Talibanization entails a religious dimension as well. The Taliban uphold the strictest interpretation of Islam. Although during their rule their implementation of Sharia law resulted in extreme brutality, the widespread corruption which surfaced during their successor's governance boosted the Taliban's religious legitimacy in retrospect. In other words, the existence of relative transparency under Taliban rule when compared to the pervasive corruption in post-Taliban order was translated as the Taliban's commitment to piety which boosted their religious legitimacy in some corners of Afghan society.

One cannot disregard the significance of religious legitimacy in highly fragile societies undermined by conflict. Within these conflict-driven societies with a fragmented sense of national consciousness pre-modern value-systems such as religion still, play a powerful mobilizing role in

³⁵ Riedel Bruce. "Pakistan, Taliban and the Afghan Quagmire." *The Diplomatist*, August 24 (2013).

³⁶ BBC, "Taliban Territory: Life in Afghanistan Under the Militants." *BBC* June 8 (2017), <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-asia-40171379>

³⁷ Nijssen Stefanie. "The Taliban's Shadow Government in Afghanistan." *Civil-Military Fusion Centre* (2011).

³⁸ BBC, "Taliban territory".

³⁹ Nijssen, "The Taliban's shadow government".

⁴⁰ Nijssen, "The Taliban's shadow government".

shaping the socio-political landscape. As we will see in the following section, some of our interviewees in Jarablus already link IS's success in curbing corruption and providing essential services to their religious conviction.

5. Case Study: Post-IS Turkish-Led Administration in Jarablus

5.1 The District of Jarablus

The main town of Jarablus has an estimated population of 90,000, with other thousands of residents living in its countryside.⁴¹ As a gateway to Turkey, Jarablus is a significant agricultural and trading centre in the Aleppo governorate. The region's demographic tapestry includes Sunni Arabs who account for approximately 75-80% of its population, a significant percentage of Turkmen who constitute around 15%, and a small percentage of Kurds who account for less than 5% of the population.⁴² Like other areas in Syria, the main influential figures in Jarablus prior to the Syrian uprising were those who claimed ties with the political regime and the Al-Baath party. In addition, tribal leaders and their extended families play significant roles in the community life in this district.⁴³

In late 2011 the town hosted a revolutionary coordinating unit to organize the demonstrations. In July 2012, occupants from two villages collaborated with factions of the Free Syrian Army (FSA), mainly Liwaa al-Tawhid (the Tawhid Brigade) to end the regime's presence in the region. However, the remaining number of Syrian soldiers and police officers in the town was very small, nonetheless, many soldiers and police officers were killed in the operation to push the regime's forces out.⁴⁴

⁴¹ Abd, 44, Sunni Arab, Jarablus, WhatsApp messages to the author, February 18-March 15, 2017.

⁴² Khaled, 40, Sunni Arab, the countryside of Jarablus, WhatsApp messages to the author, February 17–April 1, 2017.

⁴³ Khaled, 40, Sunni Arab, the countryside of Jarablus, WhatsApp messages to the author, February 17–April 1, 2017.

⁴⁴ Khaled, 40, Sunni Arab, the countryside of Jarablus, WhatsApp messages to author, February 17–April 1, 2017.

Following the capture of the city, the main influence shifted from those who claimed ties with the regime and the clan leaders to FSA fighters and their affiliated local families. At this stage, the FSA urgently appointed a local council to run the district and serve as an alternative to the regime. This council was responsible for providing public services and running the district in collaboration with other international and Syrian organizations that were operating mainly from neighboring Turkish cities.⁴⁵

The open gate between Turkey and Jarablus made the city an important supply channel for the rebel groups fighting to topple the Syrian regime in other areas. In addition, the city provided a good financial opportunity as various fees were applied to those using the gate to cross between Syria and Turkey as well as those using it for trade purposes.⁴⁶ All these factors rendered Jarablus an attractive territory for other rebel groups who, therefore, sought to establish bases there. With many armed groups operating on the ground, the district entered a stage of chaos characterized by corruption, smuggling, looting, and kidnapping for ransom.⁴⁷ This situation enabled al-Qaeda affiliated groups such as Al-Nusra front to thrive and gain greater legitimacy given its strict procedures in fighting the corrupt behavior of other armed groups.⁴⁸

Over time, many confrontations erupted between the various armed groups in the city and Al-Nusra front, which further increased the latter's influence in the region.⁴⁹ This situation lasted until the establishment of the Islamic State when many members of Al-Nusra front joined IS and fought to

⁴⁵ Khaled, 40, Sunni Arab, the countryside of Jarablus, WhatsApp messages to author, February 17–April 1, 2017.

⁴⁶ Ameen, 49, Sunni Arab, the countryside of Jarablus, WhatsApp messages to the author, February 9–May 31, 2017.

⁴⁷ Khaled, 40, Sunni Arab, the countryside of Jarablus, WhatsApp messages to the author, February 17–April 1, 2017.

⁴⁸ Al-Hadath news. "جبهة النصرة تقتحم جرابلس بألف مقاتل وتفتك بمسلحي الحر وتطردهم" Al-Nusra Rebels Enter Jarablus, Eradicate other FSA Rebels, and Oust them from Jarablus" Al-Hadath News, June 13 (2013), <http://www.alhadathnews.net/archives/85453>;

Khaled, 40, Sunni Arab, the countryside of Jarablus, Whatsapp messages to the author, February 17–April 1, 2017.

⁴⁹ Al-Hadath news, "Al-Nusra Rebels Enter Jarablus, Eradicate Other FSA Rebels,"

capture Jarablus and push other groups out of the city.⁵⁰ After a bloody battle with other armed FSA groups, IS took full control of Jarablus in early 2014 and enforced strict procedures in compliance with Sharia law.⁵¹ Using coercion and brutal force, IS had sole control over the area as an unchallenged group until it was removed by the Euphrates Shield operations in August 2016.

Turkey stepped in using its affiliated groups to take over the area before the Syrian Democratic Forces, a Kurdish dominated group perceived as a terrorist organization by the Turkish government could act.⁵² Since its liberation from IS, the district of Jarablus and its neighboring cities have been governed by Turkey's affiliated local administration councils with rebel factions of the FSA working under the umbrella of Turkish-supported Euphrates Shield forces.

5.2 Protesting the Turkish-Led Governing Model: Towards the Talibanization of IS

In the aftermath of liberating the city of Jarablus and its surrounding villages from the IS, Turkey and its affiliated rebel groups sought to bring stability to this border area through appointing a new local administrative council dominated by its affiliated brigades.⁵³ Although all members of this council were local people, it was perceived as a Turkish-affiliated project by many locals. Therefore, local opinion had set high expectations for this council and its effectiveness.⁵⁴ However, many factors hindered this council from delivering sufficient services and effectively running the area. The

⁵⁰ Khaled, 40, Sunni Arab, the countryside of Jarablus, WhatsApp messages to the author, February 17–April 1, 2017.

⁵¹ Arabi 21. داعش يسيطر على جرابلس وينسحب من سراقب". Arabi 21 January 18, 2014, <https://arabi21.com/story/721079/داعش-يسيطر-على-جرابلس-وينسحب-من-سراقب/>.

⁵² Jusoor. "Euphrates Shield Operation: An Extra Impetus for Turkish Policy Options," *Jusoor for Studies*, (October 2016): 2.;

Arabi 21. "المعارضة تسابق الأكراد للسيطرة على آخر معاقل "داعش" بحلب", Syrian Opposition Forces Races the Kurds in taking over ISIS last stronghold in Aleppo". Arabi 21 August 21, 2016,

<https://arabi21.com/story/935559/المعارضة-تسابق-الأكراد-للسيطرة-على-آخر-معاقل-الأكراد-في-جرابلس/>.

⁵³ Almodon. "Jarablus: Sultan Murad Brigade Dominates the City's Local Council". Almodon September 9, 2016, <http://www.almodon.com/arabworld/2016/9/9/جرابلس-فرقة-السلطان-مراد-تستأثر-بالمجلس-المحلي>.

⁵⁴ Haid, Haid, "Post-ISIS Governance in Jarablus: A Turkish-led Strategy,". Chatham House, 2017.

focus of Turkey on military objectives in the region and its concerns about its long term stability have halted its commitment to invest in large scale projects and provide sustainable solutions to people's essential needs.⁵⁵ There was a consensus among our informants that under this council's administration, corruption, insecurity, and ethnic-based discrimination had sharply increased. Thus, many protests broke out against the appointed council including a huge protest erupted in February 2017 following the decision to ban females from wearing the full-face veil (niqab) in schools.⁵⁶

Rebel factions operating in Jarablus responded to this protest and issued a joint statement discharging the council members and asking the central court to arrest them.⁵⁷ On 5th March, a new council was formed in Turkey after consultations between the military factions operating under the Euphrates Shield operation, some independent FSA factions, some influential local figures and the Syrian interim government which was formed in Turkey by the National Coalition for Syrian Revolutionary and Opposition Forces to serve as an alternative to the main Syrian regime in Damascus.⁵⁸

Initial interviews with locals and follow up communications with them revealed that people were initially optimistic about the new council given that many influential local figures and the interim government were involved in its formation. However, months passed since the appointment of the new council and people expressed their dissatisfaction with the continuation of poor services provided in Jarablus.

⁵⁵ Haid, Haid, "Post-ISIS Governance in Jarablus: A Turkish-led Strategy,".

⁵⁶ Alhal, الفصائل تعتقل رئيس المجلس المحلي بجرابلس بعد إصدار قرار بمنع النقاب في المدينة, Rebel Groups Arrest the Head of the Local Council after the Decision to ban the Niqab in the City". Alhal, February 12, 2017, <https://7al.net/2017/02/12/جرابلس-منع-النقاب-في-جرابلس/>.

⁵⁷ Zaman Alwsl, عزل المجلس المحلي ومظاهرات، قرار منع النقاب في المدارس يثير اضطرابات في جرابلس, Dismantling the Local Council and Demonstration, the Decision to Ban Niqab in Schools Instigates Unrest in Jarablus", Zaman Alwsl, February 12, 2017, <https://www.zamanalwsl.net/news/article/76796>.

⁵⁸ Eldorar, تشكيل مجلس محلي جديد في جرابلس بعد عزل سابقه, Forming a New Local Council in Jarablus after Dismantling the Former", Eldorar, March 3, 2017, <http://eldorar.com/node/109438>;

Khalil Abd, رئيس مجلس جرابلس المحلي: نحن مجلس منتخب ونخضع للسلطة القضائية, The head of the Local Council in Jarablus: We are an Elected Council and We are Subjected to the Juridical System," Interview by Souhib Mkahhal, SNP Syria, July 1, 2017, Text, <https://snpsyria.org/?p=8635>.

In what follows, we present some locals' opinions about this post-IS governing model in terms of the provision of security, issues of corruption, the justice system, and key public services. It should be acknowledged that most interviews used in this section refer to the first council, which was in power when initial interviews were conducted. The authors also contacted the same interviewees at different points of time to confirm their outcomes. It should also be acknowledged that this section focuses on people's perception of the Turkish-led governing model but it is by no means a factual analysis of this model. Although their observation may not be fully factual, their perception of the situation can give us an insight into the public outlook about the post-IS governing model and the ways in which it compares to the IS administration.

Starting with security services, the failure to provide security is perceived by locals to be among the most salient shortcomings of post-IS administration in Jarablus. All interviewees commonly expressed their concerns about the widespread chaos, crime and insecurity in the city and its affiliated villages. Incidents of random shooting, looting, and kidnapping for ransom were commonly discussed by all interviewees. This is consistent with other reports coming from this region which indicated that the presence of rebel forces has further exacerbated the security problem and that checkpoints in the city was seen as a source of income for corrupt officials rather than a security measure.⁵⁹ ⁶⁰ One of our interviewees Moutaz, an engineer from the main city of Jarablus affirmed:

Currently, nobody dares to leave home at night. We are always vulnerable to be mugged, kidnapped, or even killed.⁶¹

Despite the recent improvement in the security measures, people still have concerns about their safety given the violations that are committed by

⁵⁹ Aleppo 24, "جرابلس: فوضى انتشار السلاح تهدد امن السكان والنازحين", Jarablus: Chaos and Uncontrolled Spread of Weapons Threaten the Security of Residents and Displaced Families", Aleppo 24, August 19, 2017, <http://aleppo24.com/?p=6611>.

⁶⁰ Haid, Haid, "Post-ISIS Governance in Jarablus: A Turkish-led Strategy,".

⁶¹ Moutaz, 36, Sunni Arab, Jarablus, WhatsApp messages to the author, February 10-March 16, 2017.

armed groups affiliated with the FSA. Interestingly, a member of the appointed local council in Jarablus stated:

The recent deployment of 500 policemen did not increase the security level in the region as many violations are perpetuated by members of the FSA or those who have ties to them. It is always upsetting that corrupt members of the FSA and some rebel factions working under the umbrella of the Euphrates Shield are engaging in random shooting, kidnapping, and other corrupt activities.⁶²

Another significant perception of insecurity by locals stems from the spread of armed groups within the city. As Ameen, a school principal from the countryside of Jarablus stated:

Military manifestations are everywhere as more than twenty military factions are operating in this small region. This gives an impression that we live in a war zone.⁶³

Informants confirmed that many civil demonstrations were organized in Jarablus demanding that the current administration ended the chaos and brought stability back. In one example, a recent crime by a member of the FSA instigated widespread demonstrations in the city. As Khaled, a farmer from the countryside of Jarablus explained:

People were outraged after a member of a rebel group executed a worker in Jarablus just because he refused to fix his car after midnight. He killed the worker and shot his child in the leg.⁶⁴

⁶² Abd, 44, Sunni Arab, Jarablus, WhatsApp messages to the author, February 18-March 15, 2017.

⁶³ Ameen,49, Sunni Arab, the countryside of Jarablus, WhatsApp messages to the author, February 9-May 31, 2017.

⁶⁴ Khaled, 40, Sunni Arab, the countryside of Jarablus, WhatsApp messages to the author, February 17–April 1, 2017.

Such protests and demands largely resemble what the Afghans protested about in both pre-Taliban and post-Taliban phases.⁶⁵ Recalling the proposed notion of Talibanization, the continuous failure of the current official administration in providing security and the neglect the people's demands could both empower IS and pave its way to having a long-term influence. This becomes more likely if the residents start perceiving IS as a better provider of security or a more successful ruler. Hence, it is significant to measure the perceived gap between the level of security provided today and that provided by IS in this region.

When they were asked to compare the situation before and after IS, most of our informants expressed their resentment about the climate of chaos, insecurity, and lawlessness which had emerged after the downfall of IS. The view was stated by most of our interviewees in Jarablus. For example, Ali, an employee of the city of Jarablus said:

The level of security has deteriorated following the eviction of IS from the city. Today issues of random shooting, looting, and kidnapping are very common. All these crimes did not exist when IS was in power given that the group controlled the region with an iron fist.⁶⁶

Ameen also confirmed this view:

The level of security was very high under IS as it could enforce order. Today, the situation is extremely different as looting and kidnapping turn out to be a normal part of people's lives and most of these violations are committed by the FSA fighters themselves.⁶⁷

⁶⁵ Grim Ryan, "Why Afghanistan Is Going to Fall to The Taliban Again. And It's Not Why You Think", Huffpost, October 5, 2015, http://www.huffingtonpost.com/entry/sarah-chayes-kunduz_us_56103348e4b0768127024d1b.

⁶⁶ Ali, 35, Sunni Arab, Jarablus, WhatsApp messages to the author, February 19-March 31, 2017.

⁶⁷ Ameen, 49, Sunni Arab, the countryside of Jarablus, WhatsApp messages to the author, February 9-May 31, 2017.

This situation, if it remains unchanged for a longer period, is very likely to provide IS with a new grassroots voluntary support which would strengthen the organization in the long term. Indeed, the Talibanization of IS would become more likely when people associate its success in providing security not only to their sheer ruthlessness but to the group's ideology and religious conviction. Most of our interviewees expressed their disagreement with IS ideology and extremism. Yet, a small proportion attributed IS's relative success in providing security and essential services to their religious commitment and ideology. Burhan, a dentist from the countryside of Jarablus stated:

Religion must be a primary thing in any governance. The Islamic governance and the strict Sharia law proposed by the Islamic State was for many of us a sparkle of hope. Only by strict compliance to Sharia law could IS maintain security and eliminate crime. When IS was in power people were totally regulated by Sharia law. Thus, corrupt people were investigated and penalized by a single system, whereas the current administration has no central reference point, each faction acts as a state in itself.⁶⁸

Another Interviewee Mahmoud, a worker from Jarablus said:

The system of *Hudud* (Holy rules) enforced by Sharia law brings about more justice and equality. I prefer the applied justice of the IS and favor the idea of the Islamic governance. There have been already protests in and more 35 IS members have been arrested which suggest that they have many more supporters in the area.⁶⁹

This suggests that at least among some segments of the community, in retrospect, IS may have gained more religious legitimacy in a climate where the new governing body representing 'secularism' and is failing to maintain law and order. Another channel of governance in which the IS

⁶⁸ Burhan, 27, Sunni Arab, the countryside of Jarablus, WhatsApp messages to the author, 18 March, 2017.

⁶⁹ Mahmoud, 33, Sunni Kurdish, Jarablus, WhatsApp messages to the author, 19 March, 2017.

model surpasses the Turkish-led model in Jarablus is in the issue of corruption and the justice system. Corruption in all its forms was reported by informants to be responsible for many governance-associated problems. All interviewees acknowledged the seriousness of the level of corruption engulfing all aspects of the existing administration.

This corruption takes many forms including bribes, nepotism, cronyism, and most seriously, ethnic-based favoritism. According to the locals, corruption negatively affects the work of the local courts, humanitarian organizations, and other public institutions managed by the local council. Many of our informants suggested that widespread corruption and the lenient justice system are among the causes of widespread insecurity. For example, many residents expressed their frustration about the inability of the local court to enforce its sentences on criminals.

As Khaled stated:

Members of the local court in Jarablus are highly respected by residents, but they are sometimes powerless due to the influence exercised by rebel groups on the work of the local court and other public institutions.⁷⁰

Corruption has rendered the justice system lenient and unreliable. The impact of corruption on local courts has also encouraged other organizations to engage in corrupt activities. Interviewees refer also to corrupt acts committed by rebel groups at checkpoints that control both traffic and trade imports. Adnan, a merchant from the countryside of Jarablus stated:

Checkpoints are used as a source of income for corrupt officers and armed groups who usually ask for money to facilitate traffic and let people pass. They deal with it as a business of thousands of dollars

⁷⁰ Khaled, 40, Sunni Arab, the countryside of Jarablus, WhatsApp messages to the author, February 17–April 1, 2017.

as they are not subject to penalties. Personally, I pay 1500 dollars for each truck to pass a checkpoint on my way to Manbij.⁷¹

Another channel of corruption in Jarablus according to informants lies in the work of humanitarian organizations. They highlight the fact that international organizations are not permitted by the Turkish authorities to work inside Jarablus and only Turkish organizations are allowed to operate there. While informants do not have a clear understanding of Turkey's reasons for preventing international organizations, they all believe that corruption renders the work of the existing organizations ineffective. As our interviewee Khaled stated:

Many Turkish organizations such as Efad and IHH distribute humanitarian aid to locals but their work is highly distorted by corruption. Distribution of goods and aid items does not occur on an equal basis as the council members who direct these organizations exploit their power for private gain.⁷²

The destructive impact of corruption in post-conflict phases on the legitimacy of the governing body is undeniable. However, the widespread corruption and the lenient justice system in post-IS Jarablus may not only undermine the legitimacy of the Turkish-led administration but also increase the perceived legitimacy of IS given the latter's record of 'integrity'. Again, this is not to disassociate IS completely from corrupt activities. As reported earlier, the military pressure on the group and the subsequent economic difficulties at later stages pushed high and low ranked officials to engage in corrupt and banned activities for their own private gains.⁷³ Furthermore, the rigid set of rules and the promotion of Sharia courts enabled IS to be perceived as an 'incorrupt' sub-state group

⁷¹ Adnan, 41, Sunni Arab, the countryside of Jarablus, WhatsApp messages to the author, August 15, 2017.

⁷² Khaled, 40, Sunni Arab, the countryside of Jarablus, WhatsApp messages to the author, February 17–April 1, 2017.

⁷³ Revkin Mara, "The Legal Foundations of the Islamic State,"

in many areas of Syria.⁷⁴ However, this does not ignore the fact that the group exploited the public anger against corruption to position itself as antidote through its public narratives.⁷⁵ This fact was affirmed by many of our interviewees whom, despite their disagreement with IS extremism, see that the group was relatively incorrupt and transparent. For example, Ameen, a school principle from the countryside of Jarablus explained:

IS success in providing better services can be attributed to many reasons. One reason was the group's stance against corruption. When IS was in power nobody dared to steal or bribe, fearing the group's strict punishments.⁷⁶

In a similar way to the Taliban's situation, people whose interests and quality of life were negatively affected by the corrupt post-IS governing body in Jarablus express a high level of resentments towards this model and appreciated the level of stability and integrity propended by IS.

Another form of corruption in post-IS Jarablus is the ethnic-based favouritism towards the Turkmen community which at time involves discrimination against Arabs. The sensitivity of this form of corruption, albeit minor in its application, is estimated to have had a major influence on the legitimacy of Jihadi groups like IS who promote the idea of "equality" under Sharia law. It should be pointed out that the lack of inclusive governance by IS in terms of their discrimination against religious groups other than Sunni Muslims was not felt in areas predominantly inhabitant by Sunni Muslims, which applies to most IS territories in Syria. In such areas, IS promotion of the idea of "equality" resonates more among the residents. Furthermore, the group always sought legalizing its activities using its own interpretation Islamic law including its treatment of other groups as second grade citizens.⁷⁷ Earlier reports also indicated that IS had a two-tier rules system favoring those who are part of the group "brothers" and discriminating

⁷⁴ Khalaf, Rana. "Beyond Arms,".

⁷⁵ Kavakeb, "ISIS Cannot Be Defeated,"

⁷⁶ Ameen,49, Sunni Arab, the countryside of Jarablus, WhatsApp messages to the author, February 9-May 31, 2017.

⁷⁷ Revkin Mara, "The Legal Foundations of the Islamic State,"

against the rest of the population as happened in Mosul in Iraq.⁷⁸ It should also be noted that this flawed system was limited to certain areas and it cannot be associated with all the branches of IS governing bodies. The group's punishing system towards its members in response to locals' complaints further solidified the perception of their adherence to equality and integrity.

The ethnic-based favoritism in post-IS administrations according to informants contributes to newly-felt ethnic tensions in the region. The same problem was proved to be alarming in the other post-IS governing bodies controlled by the Kurdish-led Syrian Democratic Forces such as the city of Manbij.⁷⁹ Many residents in Manbij, which is predominantly inhabited by Arabs, view any violation by the SDF and its affiliated institutions as ethnic-based. In the nearby Jarablus, the danger of this favoritism towards the Turkmen was interestingly acknowledged by the group themselves. A member of the local council in Jarablus stated:

A Turkmen clan leader sent a statement to the local council alarmed that the continuous ethnic-based favoritism towards the Turkmen community in Jarablus may distort communal relationships and lead to confrontations at a later stage.⁸⁰

The interviewees highlighted the feeling that tensions between Arabs and Turkmen had never been a critical issue in Jarablus before the Turkish-led operations. They suggested that local Arabs believe that Turkmen receive better services and gain most of the job opportunities.

Whether this ethnic discrimination is intentional or not, and whether it has been exaggerated by our interviewees, its influence on retrospective legitimacy of IS is undeniable. Some interviewees explain that following IS strict rules based on Sharia law, all people were "equal" before the law. For example, Burhan stated:

⁷⁸ Abdul-Ahad, Ghaith, "How the people of Mosul subverted Isis 'apartheid'," The Guardian, January 30, 2018.

⁷⁹ Mohamad, Amer. "New Deal Offers Manbij a Chance to End Isolation," Chatham House, July 2018. <https://syria.chathamhouse.org/research/new-deal-offers-manbij-a-chance-to-end-isolation>.

⁸⁰ Abd, 44, Sunni Arab, Jarablus, WhatsApp messages to the author, February 18-March 15, 2017.

When IS was in power, Sharia law was enforced people were equal before this law. IS used to treat people on an equal basis and all residents appreciated this. The situation now is different as the current council is mired in corruption.⁸¹

The ineffectiveness of public services in the post-IS regime has contributed to a retrospective legitimacy for IS. Interviewees suggest that months have passed since the liberation of Jarablus and yet there is no clear advance in key public services. All interviewees share anger towards most of these services and a relative feeling of deprivation in comparison to the services provided by IS. Locals reported their dissatisfaction with education services even though the schools were opened for the first time since IS took over the region. They stated that only two schools are functioning in the city of Jarablus, while all schools in the affiliated villages are still closed. Resentment toward these poor services is very high. As Moutaz explained:

It is very upsetting that we pay 1500 Syrian pounds (3 dollars) in these difficult economic circumstances to a group of volunteers to teach our kids privately as most schools are still closed. In the main city, few schools are open but there is no curriculum or materials and teachers are not qualified as they have been appointed through cronyism.⁸²

The provision of health services is also perceived by many locals to be poor and far from expectations. As Zeid, a teacher from the countryside of Jarablus stated:

Only one hospital has been constructed in Jarablus since it was liberated from IS, this is enough to provide healthcare for the whole area. It lacks experienced doctors and medicines. Therefore, people

⁸¹ Burhan, 27, Sunni Arab, the countryside of Jarablus, WhatsApp messages to the author, 18 March 2017.

⁸² Moutaz, 36, Sunni Arab, Jarablus, WhatsApp messages to the author, February 10-March 16, 2017.

are forced to rely on the private sector, which is not easily afforded in these difficult circumstances.⁸³

Resentment about the supply of electricity was higher and more commonly expressed. For example, Zeid said:

Electricity is supplied for 9 to 10 hours a day in the main city but it is almost absent here in the countryside. 99% of villages in Jarablus have no supply of electricity. If there is a word worse than miserable to describe the electricity provision, I would use it.⁸⁴

Another interviewee Moutaz stated:

Many people in the countryside rely on groundwater. 99% of this water is polluted and undrinkable. Some people travel for tens of kilometers to the agricultural lands to get clean water.⁸⁵

Finally, residents also complained about the failure of regular supply of bread. As Ameen said:

Bread was not available at all in the first few months under the pretext of renovating the bakeries. Until recently it is not always available and its quality has remained very poor.⁸⁶

As illustrated above, resentment towards the failure to provide sufficient public services by the post-IS administration in Jarablus is very high. However, the perceived comparison between these services under the governance of IS and the present day varied according to the services in

⁸³ Zeid, 55, Sunni Arab, the countryside of Jarablus, WhatsApp messages to the author, February 22-March 11, 2017.

⁸⁴ Zeid, 55, Sunni Arab, the countryside of Jarablus, Whatsapp messages to the author, February 22-March 11, 2017.

⁸⁵ Moutaz, 36, Sunni Arab, Jarablus, Whatsapp messages to the author, February 10-March 16, 2017.

⁸⁶ Ameen,49, Sunni Arab, the countryside of Jarablus, Whatsapp messages to the author, February 9-May 31, 2017.

question and the interviewee. During the IS ruling period, education was limited to religious courses and most schools were closed. Furthermore, the group's strict rules and the continuous airstrikes on its territories motivated many doctors, particularly women to leave the region this badly affected health services. Apart from these two services, we observed that most interviewees appreciated the ability of IS to manage other services such as the supply of electricity, water, and bread.

6 Conclusion

Although IS is callous, it is also highly organized and tactically adaptable, it can therefore only thrive in fragile states undermined by war, social fragmentation and relative deprivation where it is boosted by the revival of old sectarian narratives.⁸⁷ IS is merely the symptom and not the cause of these conditions. Structural problems as well as the ability of IS for capacity-building paved the way for the formation of a Caliphate which at one point controlled over 10 million people in Iraq and Syria.

By examining the evidence on the ground, we suggested that the prevailing socio-economic conditions in post-IS regions such as Jarablus, and the growing sense of frustration among people caused by the lack of security and basic services can set the stage for Talibanization of IS. This can lead to a new phase in the lifecycle of the organization.

As stated, Talibanization is about the politics of remembrance which entails a zero-sum game in the acquisition of legitimacy. As the fledgling post-IS administration fails to provide essential services and security people increasingly develop positive attitudes towards the previous order, which despite all its shortcomings, could provide a 'better' sense of security. We branded this process 'retrospective legitimacy'. This has been a key factor behind the Taliban's success in Afghanistan. We demonstrated that there

⁸⁷ Shahi, Afshin, Vachkova, Maya. Eco-sectarianism: From Ecological Disasters to Sectarian Violence in Syria, *Journal of Asian Affairs*, Volume 49, Issue 3, August 2018

are now similar conditions in place in Syria, these are helping IS to regenerate and to prolong its influence. In extreme times of war or post-war transition, the perception of stability is more relative than in the peacetime and if there is a period which is remembered as relatively more stable, people are more likely to frame it favorably. This retrospective framing of the past boosts the current legitimacy of IS. This is more than a collective shift of attitude as it will constitute a powerful political asset for IS enticing more volunteers to maintain its influence for years to come.

The religious and ideological dimensions of Talibanization which were highlighted in this paper continue to be important. Although during IS rule their implementation of Sharia law resulted in extreme brutality, the widespread corruption which surfaced under their seemingly secular successors is now boosting IS's religious legitimacy. Our interviews highlighted that in the climate of lawlessness and extreme instability people desire a sense of swift justice, so that this unacceptable situation could be curbed. Hence, IS's track record of "swift justice" is now seen by many as a positive manifestation of their religious mission.

Although many of our interviewees opposed the extreme interpretation of Sharia, some of them linked IS's relative success in providing services to ideological conviction and religious commitment. One cannot ignore the importance of religious legitimacy in fragile societies undermined by conflict. As was demonstrated in Afghanistan, within conflict-driven societies where there is a fragmented sense of national consciousness, pre-modern value-systems such as religion can play a powerful mobilizing role in shaping the socio-political landscape.

Our case study in the district of Jarablus suggest that IS is increasingly gaining 'retrospective legitimacy' as a result of the incompetence, instability and widespread corruption experienced under their successors. There was a consensus among our interviewees that in certain areas such as providing essential services and security, their lives were "better" under IS administration. Should this perception become a widespread belief, IS will gain an indispensable political asset which may revive itself. Thus, the

prevailing chaos and insecurity which emerged under post-IS administration has the potential to spark even more instability. IS is the product of its environment and should the economic frustration, lawlessness and widespread corruption continue the fires under the ashes will flame again.