On June 29th, 2014, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi declared the establishment of a Caliphate, announcing the Islamic State’s goal of rule over the worldwide Muslim community and rejecting the modern system of international affairs. While the state-building practices of the group have been well covered in the literature, little attention has been accorded to its nation-building project. This paper attempts to fill in this gap, arguing that the group has consciously attempted to construct an ideological community through the instrumental use of violence, a similar process to that seen in Saudi Arabia a hundred years ago. Yet the Islamic State’s strategy of international mobilization and rejection of the modern nation-state model are likely to compromise the viability of its own state-building project, its nation-building enterprise and the identity it is engineering may well be more resilient.

Le 29 juin 2014, Abu-Bakr al-Baghdadi annonce l’établissement d’un califat et révèle le but ultime de l’État Islamique: gouverner la communauté Musulmane mondiale tout en rejetant le système moderne des affaires internationales. Bien qu’il existe une grande littérature concernant les pratiques utilisées envers la création de l’État, le projet de cette construction est un sujet qui n’a pas été exploré en détail. Cette dissertation tente de combler ce vide et suggère que le groupe a consciemment tenté de construire cette identité commune à travers l’utilisation instrumentale de la violence, une technique observée lors de la création de l’état d’Arabie Saoudite le siècle dernier. Bien que le rejet par l’État Islamique du système international basé sur l’état-nation pourrait compromettre la viabilité de son projet de construction étatique, l’identité que le groupe est en train de former à travers leur projet de construction nationale pourrait bien s’avérer plus résilient.
The name chosen by the Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham (denoted here as ISIS) to characterize itself is intriguing. A state is the basic unit of the contemporary international system and constitutes a territorially bound sovereign entity, while the communities that inhabit these territories are referred to as nations. The (theoretical) correlation between the boundaries of the two brings the concept of the nation-state. ISIS on the other hand is a violent jihadist organization that has seized control of large parts of Syria and Iraq over the past two years. According to their strong ideological stance, there are no nations, no sovereign conception of the state, or an international society of equal entities. The world is divided in two between believers and non-believers. Yet, the group de facto controls a territory larger than the United Kingdom, has declared the creation of a Caliphate, and claims legitimate authority over not only the population under its direct control but the entire umma, the Muslim community worldwide (Wood 2015). Hence, the group has in fact entered into the process of erecting a “state” with its own community. This paper will attempt to show that despite their forceful rejection of the concepts of nation-state and nationalism, ISIS has undertaken a nation-building project through similar techniques used by nationalists groups throughout history. It will be argued that ISIS has attempted to shape and construct a common identity through an instrumental use of violence and the clear and narrow definition of an “Other”. After a brief set of definitions and clarifications, I will first show how the group articulated its historical and “national” narrative around the creation of a Caliphate. Second, I will discuss the strategies the group has employed on the ground for community and identity building. Finally, I will conclude with an assessment of ISIS’s strategy through a comparison with Saudi Arabia’s state formation process in order to shed some light on the group’s long-term prospects.

My aim here is to talk about ISIS’s aspiration to erect and control a Caliphate. A Caliphate is the territory ruled by a Caliph, the righteous successor of the Prophet Muhammad as the leader of the entire umma (Withnall 2014). In other words, the group is trying to construct an effective “state” – a territorial organization with its own community. According to Robert Rotberg, an effective state must perform well “in the delivery of the most crucial political goods” (Rotberg 2010, 2). Political goods encompass the effective control of the state’s territory, the “monopoly over the legitimate means of violence” (to quote Weber), a predictable and functioning legal system, and the effective provision of a full range of public goods to citizens (Rotberg 2010, 1-4). In his study of Latin American state formation, Miguel Centeno further argues that “state legitimacy has been at least partly based on the creation of nationalist sentiments that not only bound the population together, but also make the state the center and ultimate expression of that collective identity” (Centeno 2003, 167, emphasis added). In other words, an effective state needs not only a functioning structure, but also substance - a meaningful common identity that brings its subjects together. While the nascent literature on ISIS has tended to focus on its infrastructural development, little has been written about the “substantial” aspect of its nation-building project. This paper focuses on the latter in an effort to fix this imbalance. The choice of “nation-building” as a defining feature of the group’s project may appear inappropriate, given ISIS’ aggressive rejection of nationalism (Wood 2015). However, along the next two sections I will show how the group’s community-building strategy closely relates to nation-building practices seen throughout history.

A Powerful Narrative: The Caliphate

Despite their forceful rejection of the nation-state, ISIS has effectively managed to construct a “national” narrative articulated around the revival of the Caliphate that calls for the global consolidation of the umma and that heavily relies on violence and the strict definition of an Other. In this section, I will attempt to demonstrate how ISIS instrumentally uses the symbols articulated around their narrative to create “national myths” and how this narrative gets spread through efficient propaganda.

On June 29th, 2014, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, ISIS’ leader, declared the establishment of a Caliphate. Most Muslims consider that the last “legitimate” Caliphate was in place more than a thousand years ago (Wood 2015). Through this highly symbolic declaration, ISIS claims to revive the institution of the Caliphate, such as the one that existed under the Prophet Muhammad, the “Golden Age” of the Muslim civilization (Wood 2015). On this same occasion, the Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham renamed itself simply as the “Islamic State”. This move symbolized their claim to universality: there is only one legitimate caliphate, one righteous government on Earth, and all other “emirates, groups states, and organizations are now null and void” (Stern and Berger 2015, 269). In doing so, ISIS differentiates itself from other terrorist organizations seen before: while most groups operate within state boundaries, ISIS rejects them entirely to assert itself as a territorially entrenched entity. Al-Qaeda, for instance, conducted mainly spectacular “hit and run” demonstrations of violence, without any entrenchment. ISIS is no longer a terrorist organization, but a territorially defined community that has transcended state delineations.

Automatically, this bold announcement of a caliphate identified
the community over which ISIS now claims legitimate authority: the umma worldwide. The umma therefore is the “nation” ISIS intends to bring together. It also identifies the Other, the “out-group” against which their “in-group” gets defined by. (Fearon and Laitin 2000, 851). In ISIS’s understanding, the world is now “divided into two camps; the camp of Islam and faith, and the camp of disbelief and hypocrisy” (Dabiq 2015, 10). The Other is therefore any non-Muslim - in their own understanding of what “Muslim” means, to be discussed below - repeatedly targeted as “Crusaders” who have long interfered in the Middle East and prevented the Muslim civilization to flourish. Allegedly, they notably are the ones who brought the last caliphate in name, the Ottoman Empire, to its knees through the Sykes-Picot agreement (Smith 2014). Sykes-Picot refers to the line drawn by France and Britain during the First World War to delineate respective zones of influence in the Middle East. ISIS hence uses it as a powerful symbol to target Western power as the main reason for the decline of the Muslim civilization (Wood 2015). The organization calls on a violent and constant jihad, or holy military struggle, against not only the Crusaders, but all the “infidels”. As we will see below, in its extreme interpretation of the world, any person in disaccord with ISIS’s understanding of the world and the Quran is an infidel and represents an inherent threat to the caliphate and the Muslim community at large (Stern and Berger 2015, 269). Territorially, ISIS claims to re-conquer the lands under the control of the caliphate at the apex of the latter’s expansion. Finally, in its narrative ISIS has a final stage, a destiny that the Muslim community has to fulfill. In its propaganda magazine Dabiq, the group states “the spark has been lit here in Iraq, and its heat will continue to intensify… until it burns the crusader armies in Dabiq” (Dabiq 2014, 2). A final battle is expected to happen in the city of Dabiq, in which Rome’s armies are doomed to be defeated by the Caliphate’s forces.

Now that most of the symbols used by ISIS have been laid down, they remain to be tied to their instrumental use in the practice of myth making. John Coakley defines “national myths” as symbols and stories of the past that are used by elites to construct and shape the understanding of the “nation” they intend to construct or perpetuate (Coakley 2004). Here lies the paradox of the group’s name: although ISIS claims to be furiously anti-nationalist, most of the symbols it uses can be classified as myths. First, the birth of the “nation” which dates back to the Prophet Muhammad represents the myth of origins (Coakley 2004, 531-532). Under the umbrella of myths of development, the Golden Age is represented by the caliphate, “an idealized form of government understood to have existed in an era when the Muslim world flourished” that ISIS wishes to re-establish (Stern and Berger 2015, 279). The “Crusader’s invasion” and Sykes-Picot are portrayed as “interventions by alien forces” leading to the Dark Age of the umma. Finally, ISIS’ Caliphate Narrative ends with myths of destiny; the re-conquest of the lands once under the control of the Caliphate and the victorious battle against the Crusaders in Dabiq (Coakley 2004, 550-553). Therefore, the terrorist group offers a complete “national” narrative trickling-down from the declaration of a Caliphate. Despite their rejection of nationalism, this represents a nation-building practice into which every modern nation has engaged.

To promote its “national” vision, ISIS has resorted to a very efficient and extremely violent propaganda. The group has been extremely active on social media, posting frequent updates and videos of the life in the Caliphate and of its war victories. Since July 2014 it has also regularly issued a magazine, Dabiq. In releasing this media, the group outreaches to Muslims worldwide, the population outside of ISIS’s territorial grasp over which it claims sovereignty. While ISIS’s terrorist attacks have instilled fear in the global citizenry, the group’s trademark has become its unusual and extensive display of violence, beheadings and mass executions. Hence, violence is ubiquitous in both ISIS’s national narrative (through the jihad and final destiny against Crusaders), and in the way this narrative gets communicated to the Muslim diaspora. One may think that such atrocities would tend to alienate potential recruits and sympathizers from the group. Indeed, even al-Qaeda’s leadership, once a close partner, distanced itself from the group because it could not tolerate ISIS’s unrestrained and indiscriminate violence (Maher 2014, 24). However, as the next section explains, violence is an integral aspect of the group’s identity core and sits at the center of its nation-building project.

“In other words, an effective state needs not only a functioning structure, but also a meaningful common identity that brings its subjects together.”

The Nation-Building Project in Practice

Now that the “theoretical base” of ISIS’s nation-building project has been detailed, this section will demonstrate how violence is instrumentalized in practice to create a sense of common identity among the group’s subjects. First, I will examine the group’s ideology and its practice of takfīr to show how its in-group identity and boundaries are defined through violence. Second, I will prove that violence is a strategy consciously applied by ISIS for its nation-building project by referring to it a pre-existing strategy called the “Management of Savagery”. Finally, I will provide a tangible example of the group’s application of this strategy to show the concrete causal link between violence and community building.
Violence within identity: Unrestrained practice of takfīr

In Islam, the practice of takfīr is the “pronouncement that someone is an unbeliever and no longer Muslim”; in other words, the practice of excommunication (Stern and Berger 2015, 269). The sentence for apostasy in Islam is death (Wood 2015). Declaring takfīr on a fellow Muslim is a dangerous process - if the accusation is false, the accuser himself has committed apostasy. The applicability of takfīr – that is, the conditions under which an apostate is to be declared as such - is subject of debate among Salafis, an ultra-conservative branch of Islam thinkers (Stern and Berger 2015, 269). Due to the severity of the punishment, the more moderate Salafi “adhere to a ‘high evidentiary threshold’ making it more difficult to use takfīr” (Stern and Berger 2015, 269). Notably, in these moderate cases the accusation cannot be made on the grounds of one’s actions, as one’s actions are not informative about one’s beliefs.

ISIS, on the other hand, has been practising what can be dubbed as takfīri jihadism (Crooke 2014). At the heart of it lies a very narrow understanding of what it means to be a Muslim, where one’s behaviour and actions provide enough evidence to justify the accusation of apostasy (Wood 2015). Groups such as ISIS “have demonstrated little tolerance for pluralism, and prefer instead to effectively excommunicate those who fail to embrace their interpretation of Islam” (Stern and Berger 2014, 270). In setting such a low evidentiary threshold, ISIS is emulating the situation of early Muslims surrounded by non-Muslims when expending the first Caliphate at the time of the Prophet. ISIS sees itself as surrounded by non-Muslims, as a result of its own exclusive definition of what qualifies as “Muslim” (Wood 2015).

This narrow understanding of takfīr lies at the core of the group’s identity-building project. Indeed, ISIS asserts this particular practice as they simultaneously describe militant jihād as an “individual global obligation” (Stern and Berger 2015, 273). Hence, ISIS identifies any Muslim as having the obligation to both conform to their purist ideology, as well as to hunt down the “unbelievers” that fail to fit their narrow model. In other words, ISIS generates an identity for its subjects through this practice of takfīrī jihadism. The very definition of this identity, both narrow and inherently violent, then has the effect of establishing a “fighting society”, whose violence is directed towards all the unbelievers (Naji 2004, 27). Fearon and Laitin describe this precise dynamic in their work on violence:

Take the proposition that the social construction of group identities necessarily involves differentiating one’s self or one’s group from an Other, and that therefore identity construction necessarily entails the potential for a violent, antagonistic relationship with the Other. [...] It is [...] a constructivist-type argument due to its claim that not genes but the internal logic of discourses drives identity construction (Fearon and Laitin 2000, 851).  

Here, we have the creation of an extensive Other through the inherent violence instilled into the community’s identity.

Intended Use of Unrestrained Violence - The Management of Savagery

In order to understand the group’s excessive bloodlust, an increasing number of authors and scholars have directed their attention to the “Management of Savagery,” a book written by the Islamist strategist Abu Bakr Naji in 2004 whose strategy closely correlates with ISIS’s actions on the ground (Stern and Berger 2015, 115; Crooke 2014). Naji believed that a “broad civil war within Islam would lead to a fundamentalist Sunni caliphate” (Wright 2014). The “management” of the chaos generated by the conflict between a decaying government and a new challenger would then be crucial in determining the outcome of the dispute, with unrestrained violence, notably the persecution of other minorities, being the victorious strategy (Crooke 2014). Indeed, out of this chaos would then emerge an “addressable market” of alienated, leftover Muslims “for the group to radicalize and transform into ardent true believers” (Mostaque 2015). Here again, a direct link can be established with Fearon and Laitin’s piece - the two authors talk of “thugs” that can easily be seduced by the “high that accompanies crime and given honour for engaging in murder performed for lofty goals” (Fearon and Laitin 2000, 869). Naji’s strategy therefore generate these marginalized “thugs” who then see an interest in joining ISIS for pursuing “their own agenda under the banner of communal conflict,” may it be personal pride or the search for a purpose in life (Fearon and Laitin 2000, 855). There is a clear parallel between Naji’s theory and ISIS’s actions; the shocking beheadings and other acts of extreme violence are to be understood as generating ISIS’s community. This is how the group achieves the “fighting society” they intend for, a society unified around takfīrī jihād and directed against the unbelievers in order to fulfill the group’s destiny in Dabiq. Naji does outline the creation of this “fighting society”, confirming the conscious strategy undertaken by the group (Naji 2004, 27).

As a concrete illustration of the successful application of the Management of Savagery, consider ISIS’ early territorial victories in Iraq. The group arose thanks to the continuous sectarian strife fomented by the pro-Shiite government against the Sunni minority (Smith 2014). The government’s loss of legitimacy and Sunni’s perceived threat of persecution provided a perfect opportunity for ISIS to step in and frame the conflict in an “us against them”
The Caliphate Model: Long-Term Perspectives

Although the Islamic State has been successful at gaining first-hand legitimacy, it remains to be seen if its prospects of nation building are viable in the long-term. Will the Management of Savagery persist in creating a cohesive community, or will it exhaust itself under its own brutality? In order to test this assessment, I propose a brief comparison with Saudi Arabia’s state formation pattern.

The early trajectory of Saudi Arabia resembles the current strategy displayed by ISIS. It finds its origins in the alliance of al-Wahhab, a Muslin revivalist, and ibn Saud, a Najdi oasis ruler (Menoret 2013, 747). The former is at the origins of Wahhabism, today the official Saudi Arabian state religion. Al-Wahhab strongly believed that the “purest” Muslim society is the one that existed when the Prophet stayed in Medina. Hence, in his view, every Muslim should emulate the principles and rules present at this period (Crooke 2014). Al-Wahhab considered any deviance or innovation from this interpretation as sufficient grounds for the person in question to be considered an apostate, which justified execution (Crooke 2014, al Rasheed 2015). Unlike Saudi Arabia a hundred years ago, ISIS has opted to challenge the current international system by suggesting its own model of political and religious organization and ideologically opposing to alter it. Furthermore, the international community has unanimously mobilized to crush the organization in response to the group’s shocking crimes and has rejected prospects for integration.

Could ISIS’ model have any possibility of success despite these harsh conditions? In terms of state-building prospects, the group would have to develop a functioning state apparatus under unpredictable conditions of constant assault and air strikes. In such conditions, it will prove extremely difficult for the orga-
nization to build durable institutions and the infrastructure required for a strong, functioning state. In terms of nation-building prospects, the group has so far proven very successful at attracting a constant flow of jihadists and believers from around the world. The international mobilization may actually reinforce every single mechanism of the group’s identity-building project. A constant flow of violence directed at the Islamic State frighteningly perpetuates the logic of the group’s “national” narrative by reinforcing its dual vision of the world. It has the potential to solidify their in-group members through the creation of more chaos, which generates more “thugs” – that is, more members for the community.

Moreover, ISIS is propagating its nation-building project through the numerous schools it controls in the controlled territory; hence, the project is currently being directly transmitted to the new generation of jihādi (Wood 2015). Furthermore, the Syrian Civil War shows no sign of de-escalation, the Iraqi state is still prone to sectarian strife, and both states have lost their legitimacy vis a vis their respective Sunnis populations. In these conditions, it will be difficult to win the hearts and minds of the Sunni people for the central governments. Finally, the rise in the last forty years of Saudi Arabia as a regional power in the Middle East, most notably due to oil revenue, may also help ISIS’s nation-building project to endure. Similar to the soft power of the United States – as in the spread and dominance of American culture and values throughout the Western world – the soft power of the Wahhabi doctrine too spread throughout the Middle East (Crooke 2014). The rise of ISIS may well serve as a catalyst for these ideas and attract people leaning towards this fundamentalist ideology, reaffirming their belief system. Thus, the Islamic State’s ideological construction of the umma may transcend the failure of its state-building project and remain present as a powerful idea in the region in the years to come.

Conclusion

In this essay I have attempted to shed light on ISIS’s nation-building strategy, which has been somewhat less discussed than their state-building achievements. Indeed, if the group intends to carve out an effective state, it must also build a community and inject a sentiment of loyalty into it. If this essay succeeded in its endeavour, it has shown that the group has consciously been acting in this regard through an instrumental use of violence. ISIS has instilled violence in every single portion of its nation-building project: in its narrative, in the definition of the boundaries of the umma as opposed to the Other, and in its actions on the ground level through the Management of Savagery. This violence has permitted the group to first gain legitimacy to then entrench itself territorially. As “violence has the effect [...] of constructing group identities in more antagonistic and rigid ways,” the consequences of such an undertaking could be substantial for the population under ISIS’s control (Fearon and Laitin 2000, 846). On top of its potential to strengthen identities, ISIS’ nation-building project is currently sustained through the curriculum taught at their schools, is helped by the lack of legitimacy of the Iraqi and Syrian local governments, and its ideology is similar to the Wahhabi doctrine that has spread through the region these last four decades. Hence, while the state-building project proposed by the group may seem hardly achievable given the international community’s mobilization to crush the organization, the ideas and community-building project of the group may well remain and prove influential.


