On Violence and Radical Theology in the Syrian War: The Instrumentality of Spectacular Violence and Exclusionary Practices from Comparative and Local Standpoints

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ABSTRACT
The essay analyzes the instrumentality of two modalities of violence, spectacular violence and exclusionary practices, as exhibited by radicalized groups in Syria. These two modalities, in their behavioral and discursive expressions, are instrumental for establishing territorial control, consolidating power, and reconfiguring communal solidarities. The paper therefore explores radical theology, the discursive frame that accompanies these violent practices, as a political rather than a religious or theological matter. The functions of violent practices are examined based on similar practices found elsewhere and through local narratives and responses from the Syrian context. The paper concludes that radicalized groups in Syria operate with the understanding that their ‘Islamic’ community does not in fact exist and its production requires exaggerated and magnified violence aimed at radical socio-political reconfiguration of a context that is otherwise in sharp contrast with their imagined community. While comparative studies highlight the terrifying potential of their measures, the field data collected from 2011 until 2014 points out their limitations.

Introduction

The rise of the Islamic State and its spectacle of brutality has reinvigorated neo-orientalist fantasies about Islam and Muslims. Arguments about radicalized groups range from cautiously arguing that these groups are not entirely divorced from Islam as often claimed, to explicitly submitting that aggression and the subjugation of non-Muslims are intrinsic features of Islamic theology, history, and tradition. Despite prevalent criticism by historians...
and Islamic scholars, variations of arguments attributing radicalization to religion, Islam and even Muslims continue to find interest.\(^3\)

The glaring tropes, emissions and elisions found in these problematic narratives pushed many commentators and scholars to respond and be distracted by oversimplified debates regarding correlations between religion and conflict, or Islam and radicalization.\(^4\) In the context of these debates, discussions regarding the nature of Islam stand out as remarkably reductionist. Such portrayals of Islam, be it as peaceful or violent, amount to nothing more than efforts to essentialize the religion based on pre-defined conclusions and predispositions. This debate therefore holds limited analytical worth, if any.

Select scholars, such as Aziz al-Azmeh and Ahmad Dallal, have refrained from diversions of the sort—analyzing instead the broader meanings and functions of religious militancy and fundamentalism. Al-Azmeh, having long repudiated the projection of Islam as a static body of meanings or practices, proposes studying fundamentalism in its material conditions and various socio-political and socio-cultural functions.\(^5\) With regard to the functions of contemporary radicalized groups such as ISIS, Dallal takes a further step and asks: ‘why should we seek explanation of the cruelty of ISIS in some essential Islamic cultural trait, and not in the typical behavior of gangsters who need to display spectacular cruelty and violence … to maintain control?’\(^6\) In the same spirit, this paper looks into the discursive and behavioral practices of radicalized groups from the framework of civil war studies and rebel groups’ practices. More specifically, the purpose is to point out how two modalities of violence—spectacular forms of exaggerated violence and exclusionary practices, in their discursive and behavioral forms, act as catalysts of decisionism; a socio-political condition, ultimately enabling those in control to establish order and determine religious, legal, political, social and moral norms. Thus, the paper analyzes the behavior and discourse of radicalized

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\(^3\)For instance, Noah Feldman’s The Fall and Rise of the Islamic State, first published in 2008, reappeared in a 2012 edition. For a similar argument see Patricia Crone and Michael Cook, Hagarism: The Making of the Islamic World (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1980). Through the abstraction of centuries of diverse experiences and experimentations of Islamic rule, the likes of Noah Feldman, Patricia Crone and Ernest Gellner project Islam as a quasi-monistic政治-legal orthodoxy, embodied by the Shari’a, which, according to them, serves as a comprehensive framework for social and political organization while also enjoying a metaphysical standing. See Ernest Gellner, Muslim Society (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983). In other words, this Shari’a represents the embedded ethos of not only Islam but also all faithful Muslims. That Islam is unescapably political, that statehood can only be Islamic, and that all faithful Muslims are invariably Islamists in the making, are some of the predispositions found in such arguments. For a critical assessment, see A. al-Azmeh, ‘God’s Caravan’, in Mehzrad Boroujerdi (ed) Mirror for the Muslim Prince: Islam and the Theory of Statecraft (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2013), pp. 326–397.

\(^4\)To mention a few examples, political journalist Mehdi Hasan’s views are in conformity with the expressed views of former Grand Mufti of Egypt Ali Gom’a and political scientist Olivier Roy—that Islamic Radicalization is not a byproduct of Islam. See M. Hasan, ‘How Islamic is the Islamic State’, New Statesman, 10 March 2015 http://www.newstatesman.com/world-affairs/2015/03/mehdi-hasan-how-islamic-islamic-state, accessed November 2016; W. Fayez, ‘Ali Gom’a: Da’esh Nabh Shaytani Wa Tamsilyya Sakhifa Dod al-Islam’, el-watan, 21 August 2014 http://www.elwatannews.com/news/details/543055, accessed November 2016 (in Arabic). Islamic scholars Khaled Abou el-Fadl and John Esposito further elaborate that the theology of Islam is distant from religious oppression and aggression. See Khaled Abou el-Fadl, The Place of Tolerance in Islam (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 2002), p. 19; John Esposito, Islam: The Straight Path (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998). They argue that the decrees and stipulations of Jihad and religious oppression are not founded on methodologically sound Qur’anic interpretations. See Abou el-Fadl, op. cit., p. 19. This argument assumes that Jihadis simply do not understand Islam or the Qur’an. The Qur’an contains verses for peace as well as verses calling for violence, as does the Old Testament. The neglect of the contradictory content and arbitrary focus on the peaceful content qualify the argument as apologetic.

\(^5\)Aziz al-Azmeh, Syria and the Fundamentalist Surge: On Fundamentalism, Sectarianism and Culture (Beirut: Riyadh el-Rayyes Books, 2015) (in Arabic).

\(^6\)Ahmad Dallal, The Political Theology of ISIS: Prophets, Messiahs, & ‘the Extinction of the Grayzone’ (Tadween Publishing: George Mason University, 2017), p. 32.
groups as an instrument of control and assesses their functions based on comparative studies as well as field data from Syria.

The literature on civil war dynamics and rebel group behavior puts forth overwhelming comparative evidence illustrating how armed groups engaged in protracted armed conflict act as rational actors in pursuit of strategic objectives such as establishing territorial control and undermining the influence of incumbents. In the same vein, rebel formations in Syria employ various methods in pursuit of their objectives. Therefore, the paper approaches discursive and behavioral practices employed by such radicalized groups as strategic measures, rather than random or merely instinctive expressions of religious or social subjectivities. Even in case such discursive and behavioral practices are motivated by belief and duly expressed without awareness of their functions, this does not imply that violent practices shed their instrumentality. Through exaggerated violence and exclusionary practices, radicalized groups are capable of establishing an absolutist order with hegemonic power structures enabling the suppression of dissent and the reconfiguration of communal solidarities and personal subjectivities. Ultimately, the aim of violence, as explicitly stated by the Islamic State, is ‘to further bring division […] and destroy the grayzone everywhere’. Unlike some orientalist scholars, radicalized groups have understood that their ‘Islamic’ community does not in fact exist, and its production requires radical social and political reconfiguration of a context that is otherwise in sharp contrast with their imagined community. Violence is therefore used as the decisive emancipatory energy in the transition from an order that is decaying to a new one that has decisionism as its defining core.

The instrumentality of spectacular violence and exclusionary practices are discussed based on examples from Syria and beyond. The first part elaborates on the specific focus of the paper within the relevant literature as well as situates its methodological grounding. The specific focus of the literature review is the relation between order and violence from a comparative standpoint. The paper then looks into violent practices and social organization under radicalized groups, such as the Islamic State, Hay’at Tahrir al-Sham (previously known as Nusra Front), and the Islamic Front. The third part then examines exclusionary discourses and practices. The empirical data is integrated throughout the second and third sections. The last section of the paper synthesizes findings by elaborating on the politics and decisionist propensities of radicalized groups.

Comparative studies suggest that spectacular violence and exclusionary practices are often instruments of effective control and social polarization. However, the field data

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7 Ana Arjona, Rebelocracy: Social Order in the Colombian Civil War (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016), p. 9; Jeremy Weinstein, Inside Rebellion: The Politics of Insurgent Violence (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), pp. 198–258.

8 The extinction of the Grayzone’, Dabiq 7, January-February 2015 https://clarionproject.org/docs/islamic-state-dabiq-magazine-issue-7-from-hypocrisy-to-apostasy.pdf, pp. 54–66, accessed March 2018 (emphasis added). According to the explanation provided in Dabiq, the Grayzone stands for those who do not actively support the Islamic State and attempt to find common ground with other religious communities or the secular state system.

9 ISIS also proffers a historist argument—that of continuity with the foundational past. By claiming that reislamization is not a novelty but the recovery of an essence that has been in abeyance, Jihadi groups recognize the fact that their imagined ‘Islamic community’ does not exist in actuality.

10 Radicalized in the political sense is the endorsement of violent means for uncompromising socio-political objectives in a zero sum contest. Despite their differences, these groups share the objective of establishing a theocracy to replace the current political order and exhibit similar violent practices in varying degrees.
shows that radicalized groups have contributed to strengthening the plurality of local divisions rather than their polarization. To the disappointment of radicalized groups and contrary to hasty anticipations and impressionistic commentaries about absolute sectarian enmity, up until mid-2014, the ‘grayzone’ in Syria was neither extinct nor gray, but rather resilient and diverse.

**Violence and order: conceptual framework**

The instrumentality of violence in establishing order in conflict zones is a well-researched niche of civil war studies. Scholars reviewed in this section chart variations in magnitude and forms of violence, and their correlations to order by drawing from empirical work from specific localities as well as eliciting comparative studies that deterritorialize civil war dynamics. This deterritorialization, or comparability of civil war dynamics and rebel groups’ behavior needs to be applied to the Syrian case as well. The behavior of ISIS is not unique or due to some exceptional essential features. Rather, rebel formations everywhere involved in protracted war face somewhat similar challenges, operate in comparable conditions of limited resources and options, and share similar objectives of improving their chances of surviving a protracted war. The consensus, as elaborated in this section, is that local control improves the chances of rebel groups to sustain their presence and operations against other groups. As argued by Arjona, the stronger the control of armed groups in localities, the better the chances of eliciting material resources, recruits, and local cooperation. The majority of cases in the literature, as evident from this section, come from Africa and South America. This paper contributes to the literature by taking into account contemporary developments in the Middle East and deterritorializing civil war dynamics in Syria.

If order is an outcome that rebel groups strive to achieve, what then are their strategies and methods? This paper applies this question to the Syrian case by focusing on two specific measures: spectacular violence and exclusionary practices. Although the paper is not a comparative study, as findings emanate from field data and not comparative analysis, the paper does take into account findings from existing comparative studies. Comparative insight is the hallmark of civil war studies and scholarly efforts theorizing civil war dynamics. This paper follows suit by juxtaposing findings from the field data pertaining to Syria against other cases and the comparative evidence found in the literature, thus highlighting broad processes as well as points of local distinction.

Given that rebel held areas have witnessed disproportional levels of violence propagated by both state forces as well as rebel groups, they are better suited as case studies for looking at the two modalities of violence rather than government-held areas. As the primary focus is on rebel-held areas, where control and order are unsettled and contested, the paper draws on the civil war literature, rather than the literature on generic conflict or early state formation theory and monopoly of violence. The paper does not have the capacity to include the Syrian state’s strategies and methods of violence. In other words, the paper focuses on relations between rebel formations and their localities rather than relations between armed incumbents as such.

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11 Arjona, op. cit., p. 9.
12 Perhaps to due challenges to access and field research cases from the Middle East remain scant.
The qualitative data from field research was carried out between 2011 and 2014 on perceptions of radicalized groups and perceptions of communal relations in Syria. The objective of the data is to gauge local responses to the strategies discussed. It is also for this reason that anthropological studies looking into local responses to such methods merit inclusion in the review of relevant literature in this section. The empirical grounding of the paper is based on a total number of 63 interviews obtained from different Syrian localities and communities, including individuals from the ‘Alawite, Sunni Arab, Sunni Kurdish, Armenian, Greek Orthodox and Assyrian communities.’ Interviewees come from different parts of Syria including Aleppo, Damascus, Hasakah, Raqqa, Deir el-Zor, Tartous, Latakiah, Hama and Homs. The data was collected in the form of semi-structured interviews with Syrians from different genders, age groups, levels of education and socio-economic status. The main questions addressed were: ‘What do radicalized groups represent to you? Have you ever come in contact with such groups and in what capacity? Do you agree with the objectives of such groups? Do you agree with the methods of such groups? How would you describe the differences amongst radicalized groups? How were you personally impacted by these groups?’

Narratives elicited through these questions represent personalized accounts of agents and events spatially and temporally situated. They are stories communicated through language, characterized by the subjective interpretive processes that produce meaning and value. As Duranti explains, they are a part of their narrators’ social reality, and thus provide a glimpse of existing cognitive frames of reproducing meaning, value and sense. Although the paper cannot do justice and mention all elicited narratives, those most representative of communicated perspectives, worldviews and modes of thinking regarding radicalized groups are included. The diversity amongst participants enables a discussion of salient features and dominant trends emerging despite the plurality of narratives and diversity of participants. All respondents participated in interviews as civilians. Some have explicitly stated on record as being supporters of certain armed factions and others have even alluded to participating in military activities during the course of the conflict. All respondents have expressed their opinions and shared their

13The first two fieldwork sessions were conducted in Syria between the months of July and August 2011. Interviews were obtained from the province of Aleppo. Between December 2012 and August 2014, further interviews were conducted intermittently in suburban Beirut with Syrians residing in Lebanon, who left the country as a result of the war. Given that topics such as sectarianism are generally taboo in Syria, Syrians who fled the conflict for the short-lived and relative security of Lebanon were less pressured by these factors, something that encouraged active participation. These enabling circumstances in Lebanon changed as the civil war in Syria and refugee related issues in Lebanon intensified after 2014, impacting negatively on the responsiveness of participants approached after February 2014. The security situation in Lebanon deteriorated significantly starting in 2014 when multiple suicide attacks targeted both the Lebanese army as well as Hezbollah. See for instance, Dana Khrashe, ‘Car bomb in Beirut kills four, wounds 77,’ The Daily Star, 2 January 2014. http://www.dailystar.com.lb/News/Lebanon-News/2014/Jan-02/242913–huge-explosion-rocks-beiruts-southern-suburbs.ashx. These attacks were considered a response to Hezbollah’s growing involvement in Syria and the Lebanese army’s stance with regard to the war in Syria. Simultaneously the Lebanese government officials had made multiple statements about the country’s inability to cope with the influx of Syrian refugees. See Najib Mikati, ‘My Country cannot cope with the Syria Refugee Crisis’, The Telegraph, 21 January 2014. https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/middleeast/lebanon/10587174/Lebanon-PM-My-country-cannot-cope-with-the-Syrian-refugee-crisis.html.

14This logic of inclusion is common in the civil war literature as looking at specific types of rebel behavior necessitate an enquiry into civilians experience, interpretations and reactions to such behavior. Ibid., p. 25.

15Martin Cortazzi, Narrative Analysis (Washington, DC: Falmer Press, 1993).

16Alessandro Duranti, ‘Ethnography of Speaking: Towards a linguistic of the Praxis’, In Fredrick J. Newmyer (ed) Language: The Socio-Cultural Context (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), pp. 210–228.
narratives in their capacities as civilians without formal affiliation to the armed groups in question. Narratives of respondents beyond rebel-held areas are also elicited to help emphasize the distinct features of the narratives of those who have resided in rebel-controlled areas.

**Literature review**

The linkage between ‘social order and violence … cuts across international boundaries’.\(^{17}\) Robert Sampson and Per-Olof Wikstrom conclude that even beyond circumstances of systemic collapse, in places such as Chicago and Stockholm, there is a strong correlation between violence and order.\(^{18}\) Their findings are based on surveys of 8,872 Chicago residents and a longstanding study of violence and social ecology in Stockholm. The comparative analysis evidently shows that even in these two relatively stable areas (compared to that of Syria today), the rate of violence is decisively determined by the level of contestation over control (by formal structures such as the state, or informal structures such as gangs and turfs) rather than disadvantage, poverty or social cleavages.\(^{19}\) Methods of social organization applied by Colombian militias in Medellin after the 1980s qualify and further develop this proposition. According to Francisco Gutierrez-Sanin, self-described leftist militias in Medellin established a ‘modicum of order’ through public displays of brutality, exemplary executions and ‘harsh punishments of deviants’, and not due to leftist ideological appeal as claimed by the militias at the time.\(^{20}\) In other words, effective control and local cooperation with armed factions do not necessarily depend on the local population’s ideological agreement with the forces in place. Rather, displays of violence against dissidents and extreme retributive practices against defiance and non-compliance restrain opposition (potential or real) and consolidate control.

The examples above illustrate the instrumentality of organized violence for establishing control through terror and elimination of opponents. However, Stathis Kalyvas argues in his classic *The Logic of Violence in Civil War* that organized violence alone, especially when instruments of coercion are scarce, limited in reach, and contested by a multitude of armed factions, is insufficient for such a purpose.\(^{21}\) For example, In another case study, William Reno elaborates how during Charles Taylor’s rule in Liberia between 1990 and 1992, the ruling NPFL (The National Patriotic Front of Liberia) constructed administrative bodies and courts to create an alternative order while simultaneously displaying brutality and violence—leading to an intricate system of patronage and loyalty networks.\(^{22}\) As discussed later, the courts are comparable to the Shari’a courts of al-Nusra which controlled the issuance of permits for cross border activities, defined the educational content of local schools as

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\(^{17}\)See R. Sampson and P. Wikstrom, *The Social Order of Violence in Chicago and Stockholm Neighborhoods: A Comparative Perspective*, in Stathis Kalyvas, Ian Shapiro and Tarek Masoud (eds) *Order, Conflict, and Violence* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), p. 117.

\(^{18}\)Ibid., p. 98.

\(^{19}\)Ibid., p. 116.

\(^{20}\)F. Gutierrez-Sanin, ‘Organization and Governance: The Evolution of Urban Militias in Medellin, Colombia’, in Anna Arjona, Nelson Kasfir, and Zachariah Mamphily (eds) *Rebel Governance in Civil War* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017), p. 246.

\(^{21}\)Stathis Kalyvas, *The Logic of Violence in Civil War* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), p. 147.

\(^{22}\)W. Reno, ‘Predatory Rebellions and Governance: The National Patriotic Front of Liberia, 1989–1992’, in Anna Arjona, Nelson Kasfir, and Zachariah Mamphily (eds) *Rebel Governance in Civil War* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017), pp. 265–286.
well as carried out public displays of punishments and court sentences. In protracted armed
conflicts where the monopoly of violence is elusive, administrative bodies, social services and
displays of order are complementary to violence in establishing control and social order by
encouraging the cooperation of the local population. Arjona’s notion of rebelocracy and
methods of control by rebel groups in Colombia similarly reiterate this point.23

The examples illustrate how violence alone, is insufficient for establishing effective
control. The correlation between violence and control is contingent upon the technologies
of violence as well as the ability to maintain conditions of livability for the local population
through the provision of supplies (medical, fuel, food, and other basic supplies). Kalyvas
further suggests, based on comparative evidence and empirical data from the Greek civil
war, that indiscriminate and random violence during civil wars is rare and incidental. His
comparative study reveals that incidents of indiscriminate communal violence are the
outcome of ‘steep imbalance of power’ or ‘desperation’.24 Weinstein adds based on the
cases of Uganda, Mozambique and Peru that disorganized rebel groups comprised of
recruits lacking discipline and organization in pursuit of short term and narrow objectives
are more likely to commit indiscriminate predatory violence.25 Organized rebel groups
engaged in sustained warfare are more often selective with their resources and efforts.26
Thus, expressions of exaggerated violence are calculated rather than random. Even the
deployment of seemingly indiscriminate violence may serve a strategic function. Kalyvas’s
empirical data also highlights local responses to rebel behavior. Based on comparative evi-
dence ranging from the Shining Path in Peru in the late 1980s, to the Mau Mau rebellion in
Kenya against the British between 1952 and 1964, and the Davao area of the Philippines as
it transitioned from communist rule to an anti-communist autocracy after the late the
1980s. He points out that expressions of a shift in ideological positioning and cooperation
on behalf of the local populace is an outcome of successful measures of control.

René Girard, most renowned for his Violence and the Sacred, discusses at great length
specific measures of control, namely the dynamics of ritualistic spectacles of violence and
sacrifice, and their correlations to local consent towards violent groups.27 From a historical
standpoint, Girard’s observations are most poignant in the pre-Colombian context of
meso-America—specifically throughout the Aztec empire where stylistic elements of the
exercise of violence, spectacularly similar to the splendor of violence projected by ISIS,
occupied a prominent degree of centrality in the organization of social and political life.
This example is applicable to religious idioms for framing social others, staging of brutal-
ity, and endorsement of brutal methods of executions such as incineration or decapitation
by radicalized groups in Syria.28 For instance, the Toxcatl Ceremony is a well-studied
Aztec public ritual of sacrifice with elaborate archeological evidence regarding the
details of its nature and its exercise. Archeological evidence shows that the ritual during

23Arjona, op. cit., p. 9.
24Kalyvas, op. cit., p. 147.
25See Weinstein, Inside Rebellion, op. cit., p. 203.
26Kalyvas, op. cit., pp. 210–329.
27René Girard, Violence and the Sacred (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1972), p. 255. This point is also discussed in
Pierre Bourdieu, Pascalian Meditations (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2000), pp. 138–178; Emile Durkheim, The Elementary
Forms of Religious Life (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), pp. 303–391.
28For detailed examples of such brutal displays targeting social others by ISIS, see Jean-Louis Comolli, Daesh, Le Cinema et la
Mort (Lagrasse: Verdier, 2016), p. 14. Examples include but are not limited to the Jordanian pilot captured and burnt alive
in a cage, foreign captives decapitated, homosexuals thrown off buildings or towers, and public amputations of thieves.
Aztec rule took place from early fourteenth century until even after the invasion of the Spaniards in the sixteenth century. The ritual usually took place on a ‘sacrificial stone (techalt)’ in elevated and central location. The sacrificed had his breast cut open with a ritual knife called tecpatl, and the heart removed while the individual is still alive. The crucial element reinforcing in-group solidarity in the sacrificial process that the subject of sacrifice was always structured as someone deemed an outsider and of symbolically significant status—i.e. through ‘physical excellence’ or political status. The sacrificed were mostly prisoners of war, and the rituals were staged on top of pyramid shaped temples (such as the Templo Mayor) located in city centers.

Girard argues that through the dramatization and splendor of violence, the victim becomes structured and identified as the social other in the process of the sacrificial ritual, and ‘the entire community can be reborn in a new […] cultural order’ with new bonds. In other words, the social other is defined through the sacrificial ritual. The spectacular violence also reminds ‘citizens (both in the city and outside) what will happen if rebellion occurs’. In line with the expansionist course of ISIS, the archaeological evidence showcases that the number of those sacrificed during Aztec rule increased with the expansion of the empire. Excavations of burial sites revealed 80% of entombed collections came from peripheral towns and city-states. Spectacular violence and exclusionary measures such as sacrificial rituals were employed for the purpose of socio-political integration—political integration of newly annexed peripheral areas through terror and display of unrestrained power; social integration through the definition of otherness during and through the sacrificial act. The continuation of such rituals, even after the advent of Spanish conquistadors, Christianization and prohibition of such rituals is only proof of the terrifying potential of such measures. In other words, even if local cooperation does not depend on ideological positioning or convictions, exclusionary discourses and practices may eventually lead to ideological realignment and change of convictions.

**Radicalized groups, violence and control**

Throughout the war in Syria, Jabhat al-Nusra (currently known as Hay’at Tahrir al-Sham), Islamic Front (and its most significant faction, Ahrar al-Sham), and Islamic State (ISIS), emerged as the most potent contenders for territorial control. Vast territories and oil fields fell under the control of these groups. Their organizational structures evolved and

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29 The archaeological evidence shows that the ritual was carried out even before Aztec rule dating back to third century AC. Madeline Nicholson, ‘Public Ritual Sacrifice as a Controlling Mechanism for the Aztec’ (Honors Scholar Theses, University of Connecticut, 2017), p. 5.
30 Ibid.
31 Ibid. Nicholson also details other systemically carried out (regularly and routinely pre-organized) similar rituals.
32 Ibid., pp. 5–6.
33 When the Templo Mayor was completed, its inauguration included the sacrifice of a staggering 20,000 captives. Ibid., p. 8.
34 Girard, op. cit., p. 255.
35 Ibid.
36 David Carrasco, City of Sacrifice: The Aztec Empire and the Role of Violence in Civilization (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 1998), p. 65.
37 These rituals retreated to peripheral communities as the centers were occupied by the Spanish. See Nicholson, op. cit., p. 11. Furthermore, Nicholson argues that such rituals were even upgraded and Christianized by adding crucifixion elements. Ibid., p. 13.
38 James Fearon and David Laitin, ‘Violence and the Social Construction of Ethnic Identity’, International Organization, 54:4, 2000, p. 847.
ultimately shrank, but unremittingly relied on religious councils, Islamic theologians and Islamic courts. Hay’at Tahrir al-Sham for instance is fully committed to a network of Islamic courts called Dar al-Qada’. Before Dar al-Qada’, the Nusra Front and different factions of the Islamic Front subscribed to ‘Shari’a Commissions’ which implemented religious rules and regulations. These ‘Shari’a Commissions’ served as authorities controlling the police, judiciary and hisbah. The institution’s objective was to become a comprehensive body that regulates judicial, executive, educational, and various other societal functions. As a result of factional disputes amongst the members of the ‘Shari’a Commissions’, disagreements between its theologians, and the success of Islamic State in providing a functional competing religious structure, the Nusra Front withdrew its membership, spearheading its own religious authority—the still active Dar al-Qada. In a recording, the leader of al-Nusra, Abu Muhammad al-Jawlani, claimed that the new religious judiciary aims to establish ‘an alternative to the Sharia commissions with stricter rules.’ The debate between theologians Mu’tasim Billah al-Madani and Abu Azzam al-Najdi, reveals that despite disagreements amongst Syria’s radicalized groups, extreme interpretations of Islamic law have gradually emerged as common denominator across the board. After defecting from the Nusra Front to the Islamic State, Abu Azzam al-Najdi praised the latter for implementing the hudud—ancient brutal punishments for crimes committed within territories under Islamic rule. In response, Nusra Front theologian al-Madani mentions a judicial sentence of stoning carried out by his faction in Saraqeb, Idlib. As Heller points out, for both theologians, stoning became the measure of prowess and piety.

The spectacle of brutality in Syria, including public punishments and displays of violence such as stoning, went hand in hand with efforts of creating organizational and administrative structures for establishing social order and controlling educational and ideological channels. In other words, management of violence in Syria during the conflict has been an instrument of social organization. The Islamic State’s discourse and commentaries regarding its own violence support this proposition. ISIS explicitly claims that the aim of increased brutality and overall chaos is to create a vacuum that could then be ‘filled’ and ‘managed’ and become the foundations of a ‘full-fledged state’. Thus, ISIS affirms the instrumentality of its violence. It also affirms that even indiscriminate violence (such as suicide bombers or car bombs) is deployed strategically and does not attempt to antagonize compliant or sympathetic segments of the population. This is evident in the organization’s jihadi discourse echoing the widely circulated notion.

39 M. Barber, ‘Al-Qaeda’s Syrian Judiciary—is it really what al-Jolani makes it out to be?’, Syria Comment, 9 Nove Meber 2014, http://www.joshualandis.com/blog/al-qaedas-syrian-judiciary-really-al-jolani-makes/?utm_source=feedburner&utm_medium=email&utm_campaign=Feed%3A+Syriacomment+%28Syria+Comment%29, accessed March 2018. Still active to date based on local reports and author’s interview with local contacts from 6 March 2017.
40 Barber, op. cit.
41 Religious police monitoring behavioral aspects of society and enforcing Islamic norms and practices. See Aleppo Shari’a Commission—The ASC Branch Commission Document, ‘Primary Source: The Structure of an Aleppo Sharia Commission Branch in the Countryside’, Goha’s Nail, 14 May 2014, https://gohanail.wordpress.com/2014/05/14/primary-source-the-structure-of-an-aleppo-sharia-commission-branch-in-the-countryside-2/, accessed March 2018.
42 Barber, op. cit.
43 Barber, op. cit.
44 Barber, op. cit.
45 S. Heller, ‘Jeish al-Muhajireen wal-Ansar Shari’i: ‘I bring you good news …’, Abu al-Jamajim, 25 October 2014, https://abujamajim.wordpress.com/2014/10/25/jeish-al-muhajireen-wal-ansar-shari-i-bring-you-good-news/, accessed March 2018.
46 Ibid.
47 From Hijrah to Khilafah, Dabiq 1, p. 38, June–July 2014.
of idarat al-tawahush (the management of savagery). This management of savagery is explicitly referred to as an instrumental stage consisting of areas of exaggerated brutality and mayhem where existing societal structures utterly collapse. ISIS is well aware that creating these neglected, marginal areas will provide ideal circumstances to create administrative bodies and perform basic administrative tasks to great effect (i.e. through establishing Shari’a courts, the provision of salaries, providing social services, etc.). They fully understand the power and potential of exaggerated brutality: ‘And if we fail [to establish the Islamic State through savagery] this does not mean that the struggle is over, but the failure (of savagery) will lead to more savagery,’ which will in turn strengthen the conditions for establishing an alternative order. This does not imply that all violence exhibited by ISIS is indiscriminate. Rather, even instances of seemingly indiscriminate violence hold a strategic function.

Radicalized factions other than the Islamic State also provide numerous examples of exemplary executions and displays of brutality. For instance, when Jaysh al-Fateh (coalition of the Nusra Front and the Islamic Front’s Ahrar al-Sham) captured the city of Idlib in early 2015 suspected regime collaborators were lynched, including the infamous Jamal Suleiman, former commander of the Popular Committees (pro-government paramilitary groupings during the war). In addition, after about a month from capturing the city, the group reportedly issued a list of 750 regime supporters who had closely collaborated and worked with the government. By mid-2015, many of those on the list were declared missing and others were publicly executed.

Once effective control is in place, non-predatory modes of social organization couple with the display of extreme violence towards non-conformists and opponents to incentivize and encourage local consent and cooperation with forces in place. In other words, with the imposition of order and security, a local display of consent is to be expected. Local narratives are in line with the comparative findings, as those who have expressed support or acceptance of radicalized groups have formulated their opinions based on the assessment and comparison of their circumstances before and after the advent of such groups. For example, an interviewee from Dar’a and supporter of the Nusra Front claims that the various groups including the Free Syrian Army are in fact the same to him. His position with regards to the forces in place are utterly based on the daily conditions and circumstances that these forces impose:

They all have the same principles but believe in different methods. The Free Syrian Army wanted to bring about democracy and majoritarianism. The country is comprised of 85% Sunni Muslims. So they are also working for Sunni Muslims. But the problem with the Free Syrian Army is that they were very corrupt and inefficient when it came to administration. Other Islamic organizations in our areas provided highly functional alternatives.
For interviewees exposed to radicalized groups, as long as predatory and exploitative modicums of order are avoided, the forces in place can expect their cooperation. According to another interviewee originally from Deir el-Zor, the striking differences between the various Islamic groups operating in Syria were related to their methods of local government and social organization, and not necessarily political outlook or agenda. In a discussion about the different types of Islamic organizations in the country, he mentioned that he considered the Muslim Brotherhood moderate and pragmatic, with a flexible Islamic outlook. He considered al-Nusra, on the other hand, to be an armed faction committed to the objective of ousting the dictatorship, but without a clear agenda as to what follows. He said that there are Salafis, such as the Islamic Front, who fight against the government and want to establish an Islamic state, but still allow modern day-to-day practices:

For example they [the Islamic front] would allow televisions and movie theatres but would censor all that they disagree with. The extremists such as Da’esh on the other hand would not even allow you to own a television.

Interviewees from areas under the control of radicalized groups have indicated either explicitly or tacitly, that their consent towards the groups in charge are not primarily or exclusively motivated by ideology. In other words, even those who expressed support towards a radicalized religious group, the treatment of the local population on behalf of this group was considered a measure of the sincerity of their religious discourse, agenda and identity. For instance, the same interviewee from Deir el-Zor claimed that accusations against armed Islamic groups are false propaganda and that the moment Islamic groups commit an injustice they are no longer Islamic until they rectify the situation and redeem themselves. Another interviewee, who had fled from Raqqa after being captured and interrogated by ISIS claimed that despite his disagreement and denouncement of the Islamic State he doesn’t mind living under the organization, provided that it is fair in its treatment of the local population. His denouncement of the organization’s worldview was expressed on the following grounds:

They think that everything on earth is the creation of God and hence everything belongs to God, meaning belongs to them. That includes the people on earth. For instance in Raqqa they had a bunch of rules that they postulated. They forbade the wearing of hair cosmetics, they prohibited the wearing of jeans, they prohibited women from sitting on chairs. They want to stick to the traditions of the Prophet’s age. But there’s a reason why Islam should change and bring about reforms. Da’esh don’t believe in this. I’ll give you an example; the Prophet used a ‘miswak’ to brush his teeth. He only used the ‘miswak’, which is a piece of wood, basically because they didn’t have toothbrushes back then. But now that we have toothbrushes we don’t need to use the ‘miswak’ anymore. If the Prophet had a toothbrush he would’ve used it. Instead, there are many of them who still want us to use the ‘miswak’ like the Prophet did and if you deviate from that, you are not a true Muslim.

Despite the fact that the respondent engages with some of the ideological tenets of the Islamic state, his position is decisively defined based on conditions of liveability.

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56 Author’s interview 53, Lebanon, February 2014.
57 Ibid.
58 Ibid.
59 Author’s interview 44, Lebanon, December 2013.
60 Ibid.
rather than ideology. Another interviewee from the Sunni Arab community of Deir el-zor, and staunch supporter of Islamic groups, saw al-Qa’ida as friends: ‘they are the good ones who stand for the oppressed’. During our conversation it became clear that his understanding of al-Qa’ida, similar to all those who expressed apologetic views, was based on the organization’s performance in the local context, not on al-Qa’ida’s international profile. ‘Who else was there to protect us …? There was nobody’, he said.

The narratives and examples discussed reveal the derived and secondary nature of ideology in relation to effective control. In Syria, spectacular violence coupled with local conditions of livability determined the level of local cooperation. This proposition is in line with the comparative evidence demonstrating that expressions of a shift in ideological positioning on behalf of the local populace is a form of display of local consent and is preceded by the establishment of control and order. Although terms such as cooperation, consent, participation and collaboration have been interchangeably used in the scholarship to describe local responses to armed groups, according to the narratives here, consent or cooperation with radicalized groups included both active participation with the organizations in question, in civil or military capacities, and/or obedience of commands and expectations. Either way, both are outcomes of established control and order rather than ideological alignment.

Exclusionary practices: towards a new communitarianism

The previous section elaborated on the correlations between violence and order. Violence does not necessarily or exclusively lead to order as it primarily requires a set of other forms of institutional arrangements. In this section, a different aspect of violence and its functionalities are explored. Exclusionary practices, discursive or behavioral, are a subset or specialized form of violence which aim at socio-political engineering. This section, therefore, complements the previous one by expanding on the characteristics of organized violence as practiced by radicalized groups, and by doing so, highlights the functions of exclusionary practices often expressed through religious idioms.

Although the paper does not look into causalities that led the Syrian opposition to endorse a religious framework, it is important to note that endogenous and exogenous rewards and pressures were what led to the supremacy of the Islamic framework and agenda over other forms of ideological framing within the opposition—and not a pre-existing strong undercurrent of hardline religiosity. In light of the supremacy of the religious frame, the function of religious discourses attached to displays of violence

61 Author’s Interview 53, Lebanon, January 2014.
62 Author’s Interview 58, Lebanon, January 2014.
63 See T. Pierret, ‘Brothers in Alms: Salafi Financiers and the Syrian Insurgency’, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 18 May 2018, https://carnegie-mec.org/2018/05/18/brothers-in-alms-salafi-financiers-and-syrian-insurgency-pub-76390, accessed June 2018. See also, L. Khatib, The Pre-2011 Roots of Syria’s Islamist Militants, The Middle East Journal, 72:2 (2018), pp. 209–228. Although there are some connections between hardline groups before the conflict and throughout, these connections are incidental and did not define the course of the conflict. In fact, the only connections that pre-existed are related to marginal actors such as Fateh al-Islam (which in 2007 was based in Lebanon and many of its members moved to Syria after the Lebanese army’s clampdown on the hosting Palestinian refugee camp Nahr al-Berid) and Abu al-Qaqa’s Ghuraba’ al-Sham in Aleppo (with connections to Iraqi Jihadis and under the surveillance of the Syrian state). Although these are significant examples in and of themselves, in the broader Syrian context they do not represent a mainstream current before the conflict.
become central to the paper’s question. This section is not a review of religious idioms used by radicalized groups. Rather, the focus is on exclusionary discourses and practices, a prominent form of political violence displayed by radicalized groups in the Syria war.

At a rudimentary level, the use of religious labels aimed at dehumanizing and excluding opponents also serves the function of establishing control through the identification and subordination of opponents and dissidents. The executions and beheadings of members from the al-Sheitaat tribe in Deir el-Zor by the Islamic State; taking the lives of over 700 of its members for revoking a pledge of allegiance, is a case in point. The excavation of mass graves in the town of Abu Haman near Deir el-Zor has shown that more than 300 of the killed were executed after the battles; many casualties were shot at point blank. The number of casualties is reportedly much higher as new mass graves continue to be discovered.

Religious idioms go hand in hand with displays of violence to identify and eliminate non-conformists regardless of their religious belonging. For instance, after a May 2012 suicide attack in Deir el-Zor, Jabhat al-Nusra declared that ‘these blessed operations will continue until the soil of al-Sham is cleansed from the filth of the noseiris and the Sunnis are relieved of their oppression.’ On 4 August 2013, Syrian Islamic fighters launched a large-scale offensive in the Latakia countryside, capturing more than ten Alawite villages. Government forces regained control over the area on 18 August. According to a Human Rights Watch report, during this time fighters from the Islamic State (previously known as Islamic State of Iraq and Syria), al-Qaida’s Nusra Front (currently Hay’at Tahrir al-Sham), and Ahrar al-Sham (the biggest faction and founding member of Islamic Front) among others, killed 190 civilians of whom 57 were women and 17 children. During the offensive an Alawite shrine was reportedly destroyed and its sheikh killed. In addition, according to the report by the Human Rights Watch many of the victims had been beheaded or shot at close range. Some Christians from Homs, especially in Talkalakh, received similar treatment from Islamic militants.

Another report by the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights documents killings by Islamist Jihadis of 60 Shi’ites, including women and non-armed civilians, in the rebel-held

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64 For such studies, see Dallal, op. cit., 2017; Haytham Mannaa, Jabhat Nusra: Min Fiqh al-Dam ila Jihad al-Ghalaba (Beirut: Bissan, 2017) (in arabic); Muhammad Alloush, Daesh wa-Akhawatiha: Min al-Qaida ila al-Dawla al-Islamiyya (Beirut: Riad el-Rayyes Books, 2015), pp. 53–120 (in Arabic).

65 Oliver Holmes and Suleiman Al-Khalidi, Islamic State killed 700 people from Syrian tribe: monitoring group, 17 August 2017, https://www.reuters.com/article/us-syria-crisis-execution/islamic-state-executed-700-people-from-syrian-tribe-monitoring-group-idUSKBN0GG0H120140817.

66 Ibid.

67 See K. Shaheen, ‘Up to 15,000 Isis victims buried in mass graves in Syria and Iraq—survey’, The Guardian, 30 August 2016, https://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/aug/30/up-to-15000-bodies-may-be-buried-in-mass-graves-in-syria-and-iraq-survey, accessed June 2018.

68 The term noseiri refers to the ‘Alawite sect. For more on the attack, see A. Y. Zelin, ‘New Statement from Jabhat al-Nusrah: “Bombing of the Headquarters of the Military Security and Air Force Intelligence in Dayr az-Zor (Deir el-Zor)”’, Jihadology, 20 May 2012, www.jihadology.net/2012/05/20/new-statement-fromjabhat-al-nusrah-bombing-of-the-headquarters-of-the-militarysecurity-and-air-force-intelligence-in-dayr-az-zur-deir-el-zor/, accessed March 2018.

69 anne Barnard, ‘Syrian Civilians Bore Brunt of Rebels’ Fury, Report Says’, The New York Times, 11 October 2013, http://www.nytimes.com/2013/10/11/world/middleeast/syrian-civilians-bore-brunt-of-rebels-fury-report-says.html?pagewanted=1&r=1.

70 See Human Rights Watch, You Can Still See Their Blood: Executions, Indiscriminate Shootings, and Hostage Taking by Opposition Forces in Latakia Countryside (New York: Human Rights Watch, 2013).

71 See Paul Wood, ‘Christians Targeted by Foreign Jihadis in Syrian War’, BBC, 18 July 2013. http://www.bbc.com/news/world-23361938, accessed 27 August 2014.
eastern town of Hatla, Deir el-Zor. Although the persecution of minority groups in such circumstances is often portrayed as instinctive practices of savagery or expressions of religious hatred, some minority groups have in fact held prominent positions within their localities before the rise of radicalized groups. Their persecution served the strategic purpose of depopulating areas of previous administrative personnel whose loyalty and administrative experience are deemed threatening. Examples include the persecution of Christian and Druze villages in Idlib by the Nusra Front and Ahrar al-Sham as well as the persecution of the Yezidis on mount Sinjar which is at a very close proximity to the Syria-Iraq highway which was key for the organization’s military and economic operations.

Despite recurrent attacks targeting minority groups, there is increasing evidence that the Sunni Muslim population residing under the control of radicalized groups was by far the biggest casualty that suffered from their methods. Through the common use of theologically loaded and dehumanizing labels such as kuffar, murtaddin, mushrikin, or khawarij, religious groups have targeted each other (and Sunni Muslims) more than other religious groups.

The violence towards the population in areas under the control of radicalized groups is geared towards power consolidation, not only through the elimination of incumbents but also through suppression of dissent—manifest or potential. In fact, once effective control is established, these groups have shown restraint when it comes to the use of force. For instance, the methods of segregation against the Christian communities of Raqqa illustrate this point while also revealing another important aspect of the instrumentality of exclusionary discourses and practices.

In February 2014, the Christians of Raqqa saw the first formal dhimmi pact offered by the Islamic State. The signed agreement purported to protect ahl al-kitab (the people of the book—Christians) under the newly established Islamic rule. The pact claimed the following:

This is what the servant of God- Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, the Commander of the Faithful […] has given to the Christians concerning the pact of protection. He has given them security for themselves, their wealth, their churches and the rest of their property in the province of Raqqa: their churches should not be attacked, nor should anything be taken [by force] from them, nor from their domain, nor anything from their wealth, and there should be no compulsion against them in religion, and none of them should be harmed.

72 See H. Mourtada and A. Barnard, ‘Dozens of Shiites Reported Killed in Raid by Syria Rebels’, The New York Times, 12 June 2013. http://mobile.nytimes.com/2013/06/13/world/middleeast/syria.html?from=global.home, accessed August 2014.
73 Z. Karam, ‘Hundreds of bodies exhumed from mass grave in Syria’s Raqqa’, Associated Press, 27 November 2018, https://www.apnews.com/01c50935854b425295ef8731c9cf42a4, accessed December 2018.
74 Kafr is widely translated as the excommunicated and unbelievers; Murtad refers to apostates who have abandoned Islam; Mushrik refers to idolaters and polytheists; Khawarij are those who have endorsed Islam and pledged allegiance to the relevant religious authority followed by their withdrawal and breaking of allegiance. These terms are expressed through declarations, statements, manifests, policies, practices and religious institutions of Syria’s largest Islamic armed factions, namely Jabhat al-Nusra, the Islamic State, and the Islamic Front. See A. Lund, ‘The Politics of the Islamic Front, Part 1: Structure and Support’, 14 January 2014, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, http://carnegieendowment.org/syriaincrisis/?fa=54183, accessed April 2015. See also, J. Landis, ‘Zahran ‘Alloush: His Ideology and Beliefs’, Syria Comment, 15 December 2013, http://www.joshualandis.com/blog/zahran-alloush. For examples of interfactional disputes and killings, see Charles Lister, The Syrian Jihad: The Evolution of an Insurgeancy (London: Hurst and Company, 2015), pp. 151–218.
75 A.al-Tamimi, ‘The Islamic State of Iraq and ash-Sham’s dhimmi pact for the Christians of Raqqa province’, Syria Comment, 12 February 2014, http://www.joshualandis.com/blog/assad-regime-jihadis-collaborators-allies, accessed March 2018.
The agreement included other stipulations and conditions aimed at segregating and subjugating these groups through denigrating measures of the *jizyah* payment and the identification of Christian houses with specific marks and symbols. The example of dhimmitude illustrates how in areas where control is already established, rather than brutality, taxation and economic extraction were prioritized. This exploitation however was also instrumental for redefining social solidarities. The system of dhimmitude was instrumental in the reconfiguration of social relations by antagonizing communities that have long coexisted peacefully before the conflict.

The function of exclusionary discourses and practices by radicalized groups has been the reconfiguration of social solidarities through the active promotion of distinct modes of self-perceptions as well as perceptions of others through exclusionary practices—identification and extermination. As discussed earlier, such exclusionary practices both redefine communities as well as remind the population of the heavy cost of dissent. As radicalized groups have been gradually defeated, their territorial and effective control shrunk significantly. The question of whether or how their methods have impacted social subjectivities and communitarianism remains unanswered. Throughout the interviews between 2011 and 2014 supporters of radicalized groups did not echo these groups’ exclusionary narratives of absolute enmity towards social others. Rather, self-constructed narratives of conditional enmity prevailed.

For instance, a laborer with basic school education from the Sunni Arab community in Dar’a described how the government had lost almost complete control of Dar’a, with Nusra Front becoming in charge of his area of residence. When asked about the exclusionary predispositions of the Nusra Front, he replied that the Nusra are not aggressors and rather comprised of ‘pious religious people’ wrongly labeled as fundamentalists and extremists by the enemies. When it was pointed out that there were a lot of Syrians who oppose the Nusra Front, he acknowledged their difference in opinion:

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76. The letter ‘n’ in Arabic was painted on Christian houses for identification and even confiscation of property where the agreement does not apply. The conditions mentioned in the agreement of *dhimmitude* are the following: 1. That they must not build in their town or the periphery a monastery, church or monk’s hermitage, and must not rebuild what has fallen into disrepair; 2. That they must not show the cross or any of their scriptures in any of the roads or markets of the Muslims and they must not use any means to amplify their voices during their calls to prayers or similarly for the rest of their acts of worship; 3. That they must not make Muslims hear recital of their scriptures or the sounds of their bells, even if they strike them within their churches; 4. That they must not engage in any acts of hostility against the Islamic State, like giving housing to spies and those wanted for a reason by the Islamic State, […], they must not aid such persons in concealing or moving them or other such things. If they know of a conspiracy against the Muslims, they must inform them about it; 5. That they must not engage in any displays of worship outside the churches; 6. That they must not stop any of the Christians from embracing Islam if he so wishes; 7. That they must respect Islam and Muslims, and not disparage their religion in any way; 8. The Christians must embrace payment of the *jizya*—on every adult male: its value is four dinars of gold … on the Ahl al-Ghina [the wealthy], and half that value on those of middle income, and half that on the poor among them, on condition that they do not conceal anything from us regarding their state of ales. And they are to make two payments per year; 9. They are not allowed to bear arms; 10. They are not to deal in selling pork and wine with Muslims or in their markets; and they are not to consume it [wine] publicly—that is, in any public places; 11. They should have their own tombs, as is custom; 12. That they must accept the precepts imposed by the Islamic State like modesty of dress, selling, buying and other things.

77. For examples on the changing levels of violence and their connections to changing circumstances and local balance of powers between a multitude of armed groups, see A. Ahmad and T. Pierret, ‘Les Rebelles Syriens d’Ahrar al-Sham: Ressorts Contextuels et Organisationnels d’une Deradicalisation en Temps de Guerre Civile’, *Critique Internationale*, 78:1 (2018), pp. 63–84.

78. M. A. Nome and N. B. Weidmann, ‘Conflict Diffusion via Social Identities: Entrepreneurship and Adaptation’, in Jeffrey Checkel (ed) *Transnational Dynamics of Civil War* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), pp. 173–201.
Simply put, they don’t want an Islamic rule. The truth is Islamic rule is fair to all other religious groups but people are either ignorant about it or they have bought into anti-Islamic propaganda […] When we say we want an Islamic state we would like the state to protect the tenets of Islam. The sacred must be upheld. We want shari’a law, we want federalism and we want elections. 85% of the population is Sunni, this should be reflected in politics and government. […] But I must say shari’a law will not be applied to other groups.79

Another interviewee said: ‘we want to have an Islamic state. I want an Islamic state founded on al-shar’ [Islamic laws and principles].80 However, he went on to express that he wanted ‘everyone to be respected and everyone have their rights’.81 The interviewee was aware of the incompatibilities between these groups’ Islamic agenda and the socio-cultural norms of other groups in Syria. He did not expect Islamic laws to be enforced on other religious denominations:

There are other social groups who have norms and traditions that are incompatible with ours. For instance we believe that women should cover themselves. We can’t accept anyone who would do otherwise in our areas. For instance women should sit in the backseat. The same way that I respect other groups’ rights and freedoms in their areas, they should do the same with respect to us.82

The interviewee denied accusations of the oppressive outlook of these radicalized groups when it came to other religious groups or communities. When asked about the massacres that had been perpetrated by radicalized groups, his answer was that these crimes must have been committed by the government’s secret services and their militias. While denouncing such acts, he said that Islamic organizations never committed such crimes in his area of residence. He situated these accusations in the context of propaganda against Syrian opposition groups. ‘They want to finish us’, he said.83

The fact that even staunch proponents of radicalized groups have acknowledged the place and specificities of other groups shows that until 2014, absolute religious enmity has not necessarily taken a hold of the communities subjected to radical theology. This does not deny the influence of radicalized groups on social or religious subjectivities, the communitarian function of radical theology or the dehumanization that developed throughout the conflict. Dehumanizing sectarian opinions were attributed to conflict specificities and were deemed conditional rather than an inherent feature of the social other. Interviewees beyond the reach of radicalized groups also expressed dehumanizing narratives.84 Despite never having been directly exposed to radicalized groups, due to the spectacle of violence and brutality (choreographed, documented and circulated), the threat of such groups and their allies had triggered an intolerant dehumanization on behalf of those beyond their reach.85 This, in turn, reinforced the skepticism on behalf of the social other.

79 Author’s interview 52, Lebanon, January 2014.
80 Author’s interview 58, Lebanon, January 2014.
81 Ibid.
82 Ibid.
83 Ibid.
84 Harout Akdedian, ‘Ethno-Religious Subjectivities During the Syrian Conflict: Dynamics of Communitarianism and Sectarianization’, The Middle East Journal, 73:3 (2019).
85 The population beyond the control of radicalized groups and their narratives were not solely shaped by the spectacle and threat of radicalized groups. Nevertheless, stories, reports and documentations of exaggerated violence were amongst the most mentioned factors.
Narratives of dehumanization and social othering amongst those who supported or were apologetic of radicalized groups, were not based on the radical theology that called for the subordination of non-Muslims. Rather, their narratives of dehumanization were framed as stemming from oppressive and exploitative political power structures that preceded the war. For instance, an interviewee from the Sunni-Arab community in Deir el-Zor said:

A very close friend of mine was detained for three years and then imprisoned under charges of terrorism for being a sharia student. Is that fair in your opinion? He is now a member of the Nusra Front. You can also tell from the way in which the Sunnis are treated in the army. Sunni Muslims are always relegated to lower ranks in the army. The ‘Alawis on the other hand are all generals and commanders. The ‘Alawis consider Sunnis as outsiders. The Sunni Syrians are considered strangers in the Syrian army. We are strangers in our own country’s army. What do they think they are doing? How long do you think they’ll get away with this?86

A Sunni-Arab interviewee commenting about the ‘Alawi community mentioned: They only believe in power, self-interest. They are in power and that’s all they want to do—mostly represented by the existing regime. They have enslaved our society. This statement is highly suggestive of the logic of dehumanization during the war—although respondents did not distinguish between combatants and non-combatants; the rational and justification of these narratives were never grounded on radical theology.

**The politics of radical theology: a discussion**

The disintegration of the monopoly of violence in Syria left the state but one player in the competition for power in a context in which different groups (local and foreign) sought influence and presence. In light of the erosion of territorial control, separatist and radicalized tendencies were galvanized, and violence emerged as the ultimate tool of political power and social control. Similar to processes of civilizational decline described in Ibn Khaldoun’s *al-muqaddimah* and Joseph Tainter’s *Collapse of Complex Societies*, the Syrian contexts are manifestations of collapsing sociopolitical macro-structures.87 In other words, as societies grow more dependent on the concentration of resources, and centralized institutional arrangements and modes of operation, the weakening of the main organizing force, i.e. the state, unleashes a process of devolution and localization where society breaks into ‘smaller, less differentiated and heterogeneous, and ... fewer specialized parts’.88 When the superstructure shrinks in the scale it has in Syria, localities are left to their own fate and to new patrimonial and decisionist devices of organization and government. This leads the locale to become a field where different power groups and power relations are forged. The methods for establishing control and reinstating order by radicalized groups are informed by such processes of disintegration and the implications thereof.89

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86I58, Author’s interview, Lebanon, February 2014.
87Joseph Tainter, *the Collapse of Complex Societies* (Cambridge: Cambridge University press, 1988); Ibn Khaldun, *The Muqaddimah: An Introduction to History* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2015), pp. 165–172.
88Tainter, op. cit., p. 38.
89It is important to clarify that systemic collapse does not necessarily equate with chaos or the absolute lack of order. Rather, the disintegration of centralized modes of operation leads localities to develop their own order through new or pre-existing local devices. Devolution and localization was a feature of peripheral or marginal places such as urban outskirts and the countryside. This is attributed to the sharp neoliberal turn of the Syrian state after the year 2000 and schemes of economic deregulation and welfare. Shamel Azmeh, ‘The Uprising of the Marginalized: A Socio-Economic Perspective of the Syrian Uprising’, *LSE Middle East Centre* Paper Series no. 6, November 2014. However, given that the state’s monopoly of violence and institutions of surveillance and coercion were not compromised, local devices were contained and their autonomy was limited.
The data mentioned here is by no means fully representative of Syria’s localities. Nonetheless, the diversity of expressed narratives demonstrates local non-conformity and resilience regardless of behavioral expressions of mimetic adaptation to radical theology. In the face of extravagant levels of savagery and uncertainty, for the local population to survive, it must reciprocally display spectacular obedience and cooperation, for the cost of disobedience (real or speculated) is tremendous. This applies to both government and opposition held areas. Local narratives and comparative studies suggest that displays of obedience and cooperation are often mimetically expressed by intentionally reproducing the discursive and behavioral attributes of those in power. These displays do not necessarily reflect successful socio-political engineering. Rather, such displays reflect the local population’s methods of survival and adaptation strategies. The data is inconclusive, however, as to how these practices of mimetic reproduction of discursive and behavioral attributes may have become internalized as a part of agency after 2014. Nevertheless, for agency to follow suit with the structures in place, a degree of stability and consistency is required. As the influence of radicalized groups is limited to even smaller geographic pockets, it is reasonable to assume that the influence of radical theology has been limited. Further microstudies from areas with sustained exposure to radicalized groups throughout the conflict are required for an assessment of the various reconfigurations taking place at the level of localities.

Another analytically significant aspect that deserves further attention are the striking parallels between the Syrian state’s approach to warfare and the methods of radicalized groups in Syra. The practices of radicalized groups in Syria have not been different from the Syrian state’s strategies throughout the war. The Syrian state’s strategies, for instance, of indiscriminate shelling of entire residential areas reflect the characteristics and limitations of its own technologies of violence. The Syrian state’s institutions of violence have the capacity of aerial reach without territorial access in opposition areas. Thus, it is only capable of obliterating the enemy space altogether (targeting population, combatant, geography and any local attempt at social organization) rather than establishing control over the population. The methods of violence employed by radicalized groups such as ISIS on the other hand were limited in reach but with high levels of local accessibility, enabling local control and experiments of social engineering. Despite the resilience of the grayzone until mid-2014, with government takeover of rebel held areas, the outcome of such expansive violence on Syrian society perpetrated by both the state and rebel formations may take time to manifest.

Both the Syrian state and radicalized groups share a fundamental position of endorsing violence as an emancipatory energy in confronting and shaping the emergent order. The emancipatory capacity is based on violence and its instrumentalization for the birth of a

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90Thus, the mimetic behavior of the local populace does not necessarily emanate, as Girard’s mimetic violence suggests, out of envy and desire for an object, but rather as a survival mechanism that aims to escape the violence that is displayed. See H. Whitehouse et al., ‘The Evolution of Extreme Cooperation via Shared Dysphoric Experiences’, *Scientific Reports*, 7:44292 March (2017), pp. 1–10.

91J. Martinez and B. Eng, ‘Stifling Stateness: The Assad Regime’s Campaign Against Rebel Governance’, *Security Dialogue*, 49:4 (2018), pp. 235–253.

92Ibid.

93Girard’s theories regarding mimetic causality as the origin violence are epistemically and methodologically questionable. However, his observations regarding organized violence and its direction address Schmitt’s lacunae on methods of the exercise of violence Girard, op. cit., p. 62.
new political community through effective control and redefined solidarities. This endorsement of violence implies striving for progress through destruction; integration through exclusion, and ultimately, life through death. Eventually, this approach falls in its own trap as it becomes nihilistic and irrational due to the technologies of destruction and protracted nature of the conflict that leave little life to spare. This is the manifest limits of mass violence as a form of political power. However, in the context of the Syrian conflict, with the multitude of armed factions trapped in an existential struggle, the choice of combatants for violence—for life through death—is the sole option as political settlements or resolutions were proven impossible. Radicalized groups are violent, but neither they nor their violence are irrational.

As to the functions of radical theology, the lesson is still the same as the one argued by Aziz al-Azmeh:

The complex history of the relationship between gods and kings [religious and political authority] is a very long one and is yet remarkably constant … [the relationship is that of] functional parity between king and god in their common functional capacities as demiurges of order, cosmic and human.94

In other words, the ideological blurring of the distinctions between the theological and the political by radicalized groups in Syria serves the function of becoming the authority entitled and capable of deciding and fashioning the physical universe. It is the self-validation along with absolutist operational and constitutive features of radical theology endorsed by rebel groups in Syria that ultimately rendered them comparable to the Syrian government. Rather than a political agenda addressing structural inequities, prominent rebel groups endorsed absolutist operational and constitutive features to function as self-validating political sovereigns.95

**Conclusion**

When the monopoly of violence in Syria was contested, perceptions and judgments of the social other took on an existential meaning; because, in such a situation, the decision regarding the identity of friend or enemy is over life and death. In such circumstances, friend/enemy political distinctions become broader communitarian terms of us/them, engulfing and defining the social and initiating a new process of communitarianism. The new communitarianism is thus a field of human judgment that, in the presence of potent antagonizing forces, engendered a process of intensifying dehumanization.

It is in this dehumanization that we see the new communitarianisms at work. Violence of massive scale and proportion paved the way to sectarian views altering the very essence of initial disagreements. The issue is no longer a cost-benefit interface of differing interests, for the divergence of interests becomes perceived as threat to one’s own way of life or even existence. Given that collective interests have the potential of mass mobilization, they inherently possess the capacity to create opposing solidarities and the birth of new political communities. However, as the Syrian case demonstrates, it does not imply that,

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94 Aziz al-Azmeh, *The Times of History: Universal Topics in Islamic Historiography* (Budapest: Central European University Press, 2007), p. 269, 286.

95 See H. Maier, ‘Political Religion: A Concept and its Limitations’, *Politics, Religion & Ideology* 8:1, 2007, pp. 5–16.
dehumanization is preconditioned to manifest in a pre-defined, prescribed or lasting format. Mimetic expressions should not be misleadingly interpreted as preexisting, pre-defined or permanently embedded socio-cultural features.

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