The Islamic State Group Attempts to Survive in the Information Age

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Leaked documents showing the Islamic State group's (aka ISIL) plan for building a nation were **recently published in The Guardian**. Examples of the brutal enforcement of its own interpretation of Sharia law are all too familiar—burning a downed Jordanian pilot alive in a steel cage, systematic rape, and beheadings and mass murder of religious minorities—but these documents reveal another side of the Islamic State group.

As *The Guardian*'s Shiv Malik tells it, the released documents present "a picture of a group that, although sworn to a founding principle of brutal violence, is equally set on more mundane matters such as health, education, commerce, communications and jobs. In short, it is building a state."

The Challenges of Building a Legitimate State

In order to build and maintain a state, it is necessary to wrestle with data—i.e., generate, record, manage, access, and share information about infrastructure, economy and trade, military actions, internal policing, diplomacy, and social welfare, among other aspects of statehood. Decisions must be made about who gets access to what information, and how those controls will be designed, built, and enforced. States run on information, and if the Islamic State group intends to become one itself, then it too will have to get its philosophy on information straightened out. But there are barriers to its ability to do so that will prove insurmountable.

One barrier is the tool the Islamic State group is using to spread its message—social media. **As global intelligence firm Stratfor points out**, many current versions of terror groups are mutated franchises of previous groups, and many of them can trace their lineage to al-Qaida. But as "lone wolves" and smaller-band franchises claiming to be affiliated with the Islamic State group pop up with greater frequency, it will have more difficulty controlling its message, information about itself, and maybe even its own internal informational operations.

This newly formed caliphate (if indeed it is a caliphate; **Muslim scholars disagree**) has emerged in the information age, and that means it is as vulnerable to nonstate hackers as any other organization is. In November 2015, **Anonymous claims to have hacked** 20,000 Islamic State group-affiliated Twitter accounts, and it used **#OpParis** to communicate that the hacks were an attempt to harm the Islamic State group after the terrorist attacks in Paris. The Islamic State group, watching **Anonymous' and the Impact Team's efforts at doxxing**, has tried to fight back. But with so many Twitter accounts now dead, Anonymous has hit the Islamic State group right where it hurts in the information age—its ability to spread messages and thereby recruit members.

But the Islamic State group has a more serious information problem—perhaps even more serious in the long term than if its **"taxation" shake-down lists** were stolen or manipulated in the short term. Information, although surely a commodity and a useful tool, comes with its own set of values that the Islamic State group must reckon with. For information to serve people and organizations, it relies on its users' critical thinking skills, skepticism, and information literacy skills.

The rational evaluation of governmental statements requires a hard look at the source and credibility of the information (authority), its objectivity, its accuracy, its timeliness, and its relevancy for one's own particular life situation. How many people in Raqqa, Syria, would feel prepared to make such an evaluation of their oppressors, or to communicate that evaluation to their fellows in town?

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If any organization is unwilling to be the object of these information values (epistemological values—how we know what we know), then it fails a kind of basic "smell test." If an organization, be it a garden club or a caliphate, a book club or a state, is unwilling or unable to allow the information it generates and uses to be examined and analyzed critically, then it cannot pretend to have the kind of legitimacy that comes only from such dispassionate scrutiny. Organizations, such as Scientology, can be reluctant to face open scrutiny and criticism, or, similar to a good city hall or a publicly traded company, they can be willing to face it to some degree. If wrongdoing or ineptitude is found, an organization has the choice to admit it and improve its operations, or to deny it and try to save face. Good organizations do the former.

'Good' Organizations Prevail

Similar to Judaism and Christianity, Islam is a religion "of the book." The culture of the book, of information, of communication, of (dare we say) "truth" has to permeate a good organization, whether it is a caliphate or a doctor's office—or the organization will eventually fail.

A "good" organization has intellectual honesty and the ability to withstand intellectually honest critiques. It tolerates (at minimum) information literacy skills, rational inquiry, and open debate. Good states maintain information for the historical record. They acknowledge the vital importance of keeping "bad" books on library shelves (and, indeed, of maintaining libraries) if for no other reason than that students may cite such "evil" in their systematic repudiation of the "evil" (which is why, by the way, even federal universities in Persian Gulf states have theological counterarguments in their libraries).

Can the Islamic State group perform any of the actions of a good organization? If so, then it won't be the group we know for long, and its current form will die out and be replaced by a more tolerant one. If not, then the clock has already started counting down its demise for good. No regime that opposes information and its values can last. The people living in the Soviet Union threw off that regime, in part, due to glasnost policies that increased their exposure to more freely accessible means of communication. To the degree that the government of the People's Republic of China maintains a tight grip on internet access, it too is in danger of being thrown off or obviated, as is that of the Islamic Republic of Iran, North Korea, and others. The Arab Spring was an extension of the information revolution—it was an information age chain reaction driven by higher food prices and the people's desire for transparency from their governments. The Islamic State group is not built on transparency or the values surrounding information access and evaluation, and, even if it succeeded for a generation or a century, this factor will play in its eventual downfall.

Information values will rule the information age; the Islamic State group has no clear place in it.

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