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The Islamic State’s tribal policies in Syria and Iraq

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ABSTRACT
The surprising ability of the jihadist organisation “the Islamic State” to capture and hold large territories in Syria and Iraq raises important questions regarding rebel governance in civil wars. One understudied aspect in the growing literature on rebel rule is insurgents’ relations to kinship organisations. This article offers a detailed empirical exploration of ISIS’ tribal policies in the mid-2010s. It argues that ISIS’ relative success in maintaining control over tribal areas in Syria and Iraq and preventing a tribal-based uprising is due to three main factors. First, ISIS pursued well-calibrated carrot-and-stick policies vis-à-vis the tribes, which divided tribal constituencies and undermined their ability to mobilise effectively. Secondly, the politico-military situation in both Iraq and Syria contributed to deprive the Sunni-Arab tribes from trustworthy military allies and sources of external support, which forced them instead to lie low and accept ISIS rule, while waiting for ISIS to be defeated by their enemies. Thirdly, inter- and intra-tribal divisions had allowed ISIS to penetrate most tribes thereby reducing the tribe’s ability to act as cohesive and effective socio-political and military units. By comparing tribal groups and jihadist insurgents, the article also speaks to the theoretical debate on extremist advantages in civil war.

Introduction

The rise of “the Islamic State” organisation (ISIS) and its seizure of large territories in Syria and Iraq, including the cities of Mosul and Raqqa in 2013–14, represented a new development in the history of jihadist movements. When finally dislodged from its last territorial enclave in Baghouz, Syria in March 2019, ISIS had demonstrated a surprising ability to hold on to large territories with millions of inhabitants, defying a large international military coalition, headed by the United States. It suggested not only that the military prowess of the jihadist insurgents had been underestimated. It also indicated that the prevalent view of jihadism as a fringe extremist movement without much socio-political and economic embeddedness in local communities was wrong.

The emergence of small and short-lived “jihadist proto-states” over the past three decades and the increased proliferation of such state-like entities in the post Arab Spring period (Lia 2015) have underlined the growing importance of studying how jihadists govern territories and populations. Over the past few years, the topic has indeed received
increased scholarly scrutiny (e.g. Al-Tamimi 2015; Tønnessen 2018; Cook, Haid, and Trauthig 2020; Skjelderup 2020; Revkin 2020; Terpstra 2020; Svensson and Finnbogason 2021; Aarseth 2018; Aarseth 2021; Bamber and Svensson 2022). However, one aspect of ISIS rebel governance policies, which remain understudied, is its engagement with kin-based social organisations, such as tribes and clans. Apart from a few notable exception (e.g. Dawod 2017; Al-Baalbaky and Mhidi, 2018; Whiteside and Elallame 2020; Lia 2017), the academic literature on contemporary jihadism has largely sidestepped the topic.

This article examines ISIS tribal policies with a view to understanding how and why ISIS was able to consolidate its rule in Syria and Iraq after its military blitzkrieg in 2014. ISIS' rule is commonly described as repressive, rigid and brutal, but also relatively effective and surprisingly bureaucratic (see e.g. Al-Tamimi 2015; Lister 2014). As for ISIS' relationship with kinship groups, however, existing accounts offer puzzling contradictions: a large number of Syrian and Iraqi tribesmen were killed by ISIS when resisting its territorial advances, and tribal leaders were often publicly humiliated by young ISIS militiamen. At the same time, ISIS also courted tribes in both Syria and Iraq, paying respect and honouring their shaykhs at ceremonies. ISIS also established institutions for dealing with tribal affairs, and issued specific guidelines for ISIS' tribal policy. Although there were examples of tribal leaders shifting forth and back between pro- and anti-ISIS stances, they were mostly very reticent to take up arms against ISIS. As opposed to the tribal uprising against al-Qaida in the late 2000s, when Iraqi tribes and Sunni Arab rebels sought and obtained US aid in defeating al-Qaida in Iraq in its strongholds in the al-Anbar province, there were very few cases of tribal mobilisation against Daesh in ISIS-controlled territories in the 2010s. Indeed, ISIS succeeded in controlling the tribes and preventing a repeat of the anti-jihadist tribal mobilisation of the 2000s. This was a major factor explaining the relative resilience and longevity of ISIS proto-state in Iraq and Syria.

This article argues that ISIS' relative success in maintaining control over large swathes of tribal areas in Syria and Iraq and preventing a tribal-based uprising is due to three main factors. First, ISIS pursued a well-calibrated carrot-and-stick policies vis-à-vis the tribes, which divided tribal constituencies and undermined their ability to mobilise effectively. Secondly, the politico-military situation in both Iraq and Syria contributed to deprive the Sunni-Arab tribes from trustworthy military allies and sources of external support, which forced them instead to lie low and accept ISIS rule, while waiting for Daesh to be defeated by the Coalition and their allied forces in Iraq and Syria. Thirdly, inter-tribal divisions and generational conflicts had allowed ISIS to penetrate most tribes, thereby reducing their ability act as cohesive and effective socio-political and military units. Hence, while most tribal leaders condemned ISIS, they also had to content with reputational damage and risks stemming from widespread reports that a number of their young fellow tribesmen had joined ISIS.

The academic contribution of this article is twofold: it empirically surveys and discusses ISIS' tribal policies, thereby contributing to the literature on ISIS and on jihadist rebel governance more generally. Beyond its empirical findings, the article also makes a minor theoretical contribution by offering insights from the interfaces between kinship organisations and highly ideological rebel groups. It demonstrates the uneven playing field between kinship groups and extremist ideological movements during armed conflicts. The latter with their highly dedicated human capital, a professional media & propaganda apparatus, and an effective organisation for transnational resource mobilisation and
recruitment easily outflank and manipulate locally based kinship groups, despite the latter’s nominal superiority in sheer manpower numbers and knowledge of the local terrain. In the conclusion, I offer reflections for why this is the case in contemporary civil wars.

The paper is organised as follows. First, following a brief historical discussion of the role of tribes and state-tribe relations in modern Syrian and Iraqi history, the article offers a short recapitulation of tribal mobilisation against jihadist rebels in Iraq in the late 2000s, focusing in particular on the lessons ISIS drew from that defeat. Secondly, the article explores various aspects of ISIS’ tribal policies after its conquest of significant territories in Syria and Iraq in 2013–14, with an emphasis on how ISIS combined incentives and coercive means to cajole and subdue tribes within its area of influence. Finally, the article examines contextual politico-military factors weakening the tribes vis-à-vis ISIS, and preventing an effective anti-jihadist mobilisation.

The sources for this article include existing scholarship on tribes in Syria and Iraq, a wealth of jihadist primary sources, including both audio-visual material and textual sources, selected media accounts, as well as semi-structured interviews in Iraqi Kurdistan with former residents of ISIS-occupied territories in Iraq. The interviewees included an Iraqi doctor and a religious minority leader, both from Mosul, three shaykhs of the Jubur and Al-Ubaydi tribes, and two Syrian researchers (A and F), who were also eyewitnesses, from Homs and Dayr al-Zawr.

Theoretical and methodological considerations

Despite the common recognition of tribes as an “enduring social entity” in the Middle East (e.g. Jabar 2000), it is an ambiguous and highly contested term which defies easy definitions. Anthropologists sharply disagree on the applicability of the term (e.g. Godelier and Blohm 1973; Salzman 2015), given its elusiveness, its undefined structure, the strategic use of kinship, often partly based on invented or fictional lineages, and so forth. As Samira Haj noted in her historical study of Iraqi tribes, these were not isolated and “‘primordial’ forms of organization”, but instead they continuously interacted “with other social and economic groups” and in this broader context, “these tribes reproduced themselves as ‘tribes’” (Haj 1991, 48). As a result, tribes exhibit “considerable internal variations as well as differing external relations with other social groups”, making it impossible to pinpoint a “fixed, characteristic socio-economic structure of tribes simply because they are ‘tribes’” (ibid: 49).

In short, it is difficult to disagree with Talal Asad’s famous quote: “there are no typical tribes” (Asad 2009[1986], 14). However, it is also impossible to deny the existence of prevalent perceptions of social structures, networks and identities referred to as tribes, clans, etc. in Iraq and Syria. Hence, for the purpose of this paper, the following definition may be a useful starting point: “a socio-political identity and solidarity network” informed by “shared kinship networks based on [real and/or invented] common paternal descent” (COAR 2019. See also Khoury and Kostiner 1990, 4; Eickelman 1998, 126–150; Collombier and Roy 2018, 5). The goal of this article is not to unpack the evolving meaning and importance of tribes in Syrian and Iraqi society, but rather to understand how ISIS related to social entities and networks, which they identified as tribes or clans (qaba’il and ‘asha’ir) in north-eastern Syria and north-western Iraq. When ISIS summoned and held meetings with what they
termed “tribal shaykhs”, “elders” and “notables”, one cannot know for sure what role and significance these individuals actually held in the local communities. What remains certain, however, is that social entities and identities labelled “tribes” and “clans” played an important role in how ISIS related to local communities in this region and shaped the patterns of confrontation and/or cooperation between local inhabitants and the jihadist group.

The actual socio-political, economic and military powers invested in the social organisations and networks referred to as tribes and clans in the 2010s were a product of the historical context in Syria and Iraq. In both countries, the state’s footprint and authority had steadily eroded over the past four decades, especially in the Iraqi context due to interstate wars, internal rebellions and a harsh sanction regime following the first Gulf War in 1991. The end of the 20th century witnessed a certain retiralization process in Iraq, by which tribal leaders accrued more power and influence at the expense of the state apparatus, even within sensitive spheres such as law enforcement and national security tasks (Jabar 2003, 2000). State authorities in both countries sought to harness the power of tribal identity to their own advantages by appointing loyalists to the position of tribal “shaykhs”. Their influence remained limited, however, and they were often the object of ridicule, e.g. “Shaykhs made in Taiwan” (Jabar 2000; Reda 2019).

The actual powers wielded by individual tribal leaders depended on a host of local factors, not only proximity and kinship links to the ruling elite but also “state recognition, external support, financial capital, and geographical variance” (Bobseine 2019). In very general terms, the power of tribal leaders may be summed up in four F: family, funding, friendships, and fighters (COAR 2019). Although a crude generalisation, it highlights the patrimonialist and clientalist dimension of tribes. However, as in most socio-political contexts, leadership in a tribal society is also a function of charisma and personal leadership skills. Tribes often lack “a clear and unambiguous rule of succession” (Gellner 1990, 111), and new leaders are selected in many different ways where, e.g., the presence of various “status-differentiated holy lineages” usually claiming descent from the Prophet, adds another layer of complexity (ibid). However, under the right circumstances, not all these factors need to be present for skilful tribal leaders to produce momentous changes. A case in point is Shaykh Abd al-Sattar Abu Risha, initially “a minor tribal shaykh of little prominence” who nevertheless came to play a critical role in one of the most important turning points of the U.S. occupation of Iraq, when “local Iraqi tribal forces converted from being enemies of U.S. forces to U.S. allies in the fight against al-Qaida in Iraq (AQI)” (Penney 2015, 112, 107). In many contexts, however, tribes are not effective military organisations. As Gellner has remarked, “the social organization [of tribes] predisposed them to fissipariuousness as well as cohesion”; while tribesmen could be fierce fighters, they also just “went home when it suited them” (Gellner 1990, 113). In this regard, tribal history is in many ways a reminder of the sharp differences between hierarchical disciplined cadre-based organisations of modern ideological extremist movements, on the one hand, and loose tribal networks on the other, in which leadership positions, especially in the case of large tribes, were often contested by rival shaykhs and tribal branches.
The historical role of tribes in Syria and Iraq in brief

Tribes, as a social network and social identity, are often portrayed as very important in both Syria and Iraq. One study refers for example to tribalism as “a defining characteristic of modern Iraqi society” albeit one that is undergoing rapid changes and adaptations (Bobseine 2019, 1). Similarly, in the case of Syria, its tribal regions are said to “constitute 70% of the country’s landmass” (Dukhan 2019, 2), and the influence of tribes was such that it earned them the label “a state within the state” (Chatty 2010, 29; see also Strakes 2011). In the contemporary Arab press, tribes are described as “among the primary societal components” of the Syrian people, 50 percentage of whom are said to have kinship links to a clan or a tribe. Although the accuracy of such assertions is impossible to verify, they nevertheless points to the prevalent conviction that tribes in one way or another have been, and still are, important in Iraqi and Syrian society.

The historical evolution of state-tribe relations in Syria and Iraq is obviously outside the scope of this study. Suffice to note that both countries underwent periods of state centralisation under the early Ba’thist regimes during which the traditional powers of tribes and clans were reduced. In Syria during Hafiz al-Asad’s regime, while initially striving to replace “the feudal segmental structure of the old society”, including “tribalism”, with “more modern types of relations” (Hinnebusch 1982, 124), the ruling Alawite military officers mostly sought to coopt the Sunni merchant class and Sunni Arab tribes. From 2000 onwards, however, under Bashar’s post-populist reform programme the regime’s social basis narrowed, reducing the flow of patronage to Sunni tribesmen (Hinnebusch 2012, 99).

In the case of Iraq, tribes and tribal confederations ceased to be “a self-contained social organization” as had been the case in the 19th century, but remained instead “village collectivities” with “social economic and cultural safety nets” where “tribal ethos or culture” persisted even among urban migrants (Jabar 2003, 77–78). In this sense, modern Iraq witnessed new forms of tribalism – “a cultural tribalism” – manifesting itself among the migrants who

retain their tribal name, value system, lifestyle and above all solidarity commitments, blood money, material and moral support in life and death, exchange of women, i.e. intermarriages as contracts among equals, and so on (Jabar 2003, 78).

Similarly, in the Syrian context members of tribes underwent dramatic changes in lifestyle, occupation, places of residence, etc. during the course of the 20th century. Still, as Chatty Dawn has observed:

regardless of their multiple occupations and residence patterns, they remain culturally Bedouin as long as they maintain close social ties with pastoral kin and retain the local linguistic and cultural markers that identify them as Bedouin. The term ‘Bedouin,’ originally regarded as meaning a desert dweller, has taken on an important sense of cultural identity derived from the association with tribal genealogies and myths of origins (Chatty 2010, 47).

(While the term Bedouin is sometimes used interchangeably with tribesmen, in the Syrian context, Bedouin refers to any individual with a nomadic background. However, many Syrian tribesmen prefer the term Arab tribes rather than Bedouin, partly because their ancestors were farmers, not nomads (Dukhan 2019, 5)). In both countries, external and internal circumstances over the past four decades – wars, armed revolts, sanctions,
When historically, especially hitherto, economic crisis, the advent of post-populist authoritarianism (e.g. Hinnebusch 2000) and the resultant dwindling of social redistribution and state-provided welfare – weakened the state’s reach and influence, especially in the periphery. A vacuum emerged, in which both traditional and new invented forms of tribalism forms prospered. Despite its early attempts at “eradicating tribalism”, Saddam Husayn’s regime began pursuing a policy of “retribalization” (or “etatist tribalism”) strategy from the late 1980s, in an effort to shore up support. Both Ba’thist regimes sought to build new sources of tribal authority, inter alia by appointing loyalists as “tribal shaykhs” and relied increasingly on kinship links to coup-proof their regimes. The traditional tribes nevertheless came to prove invaluable for both regimes when the latter faced serious instances of revolts and uprisings, such as the Hama rebellion of 1982 and the Shiite insurgency in southern Iraq in 1991 (Benraad 2011, 127; see also Baram 1997). Hence, they asserted themselves vis-à-vis the state during the 1990s and beyond, sometimes in surprisingly defiant manners. During the final years of Saddam Husayn’s Iraq, certain tribes had become so powerful that there were fears of a possible imposition of customary law in urban areas. Many instances of “tribal gansterism in rural areas” occurred, including assassinations of members of state agencies, and tribesmen brazenly demanding blood money for injury sustained by their kin at the hands of state officials (Jabar 2000, 48).

Hence, at the eve of the 2003 US-led invasion, which – at least in the short term – dramatically weakened the Iraqi state, tribes were already reasserting themselves in ways hitherto not seen (Cigar 2011, 2–3. See also Baram 2003). Not surprisingly, Iraqi tribes, especially from the Sunni Arab minority marginalised by the dissolution of the two most important institutions for power and employment, the Iraqi army and the Baath party, became key player in the escalating Sunni insurgency against the post-2003 regime in Baghdad.

As for Syria, tribal leaders maintained and even strengthened their authority and influence in the pre-2011 period as the Syrian government bestowed a de facto recognition on tribal leaders of the Syrian steppe or desert region (“Badia”) in gratitude of their “ability to smoothly manage natural resource allocation as well as customary processes for conflict resolution” (Chatty 2010, 46). Contrary to early Baathist calls of dismantling reactionary tribalism, the Syrian regime officially permitted law and order functions to be outsourced to tribal leaders, and granted tribal shaykhs parliamentarian seats and cabinet positions (Chatty 2010, 49. See also Dukhan, Al-Hamad, and Shaar 2021). When the Bashar al-Asad regime purged the old guard, it also inadvertently curbed the regime’s “ability to coopt societal notables such as tribal elders” (Hinnebusch 2012, 99). This was a contributing factor to a series of tribal clashes in the mid-2000s, demonstrating the erosion of regime’s authority vis-à-vis local traditional power-holders: “Where citizens would once have gone to local party or union officials for redress or access, increasingly they approached tribal, sectarian or religious notables” (ibid: 99). In other words, on the eve of the Syrian civil war, the tribes had long been semi-autonomous actors with a capacity to challenge and defy state authorities and outside powers.

A final key factor shaping tribes on both sides of the Syrian-Iraqi borders was the rising sectarian dimension in regional politics in general and in Syria and Iraq in particular. Tribes in northwestern Iraq and northeastern Syria were overwhelmingly Sunni Arabs. They had historically had been the politically dominant sectarian or ethnic group in Iraq until 2003 when a Shiite dominated regime gradually took power, a reflection of the Shiite
demographic majority in the country as well as Iran’s growing influence. In Syria, Sunni Arabs constituted the vast majority of the population and dominated local politics during Ottoman and the colonial era. With Hafez al-Asad’s military coup in 1970, an Alawite dominated Baathist regime came to rule Syria, greatly reducing the Sunni Arabs’ access to positions of power and influence. Hence, the political marginalisation of the Sunni Arabs in both countries increasingly became a rallying cry among the tribes on both sides of the border. This was particularly the case in Iraq during the highly contested premiership of Nouri al-Maliki (2006–2014), whose divisive rule is widely seen as “enabl[ing] the rise of the Islamic State” (O’Driscoll 2017, 315). When the ISIS threat emerged in earnest, the tribes increasingly found themselves between the anvil and the hammer. With the US troop withdrawal from Iraq in 2011 and the ensuing campaign of arrests of Sunni Arab politicians by the Maliki government, demonstrations engulfed the Anbar province. As Iraqi security forces responded by firing on demonstrators, the protests turned into an armed uprising in which many Sunni Arab tribesmen joined (Reda 2019; Gartenstein-Ross and Jensen 2015; Heras 2014). As the Sunni Arab revolt against Baghdad gained pace in 2014 reports surfaced of an “operational relationship” between ISIS on the one hand and a plethora of Sunni Arab factions and tribal militias on the other, a relationship which manifested itself publicly during the seizure of the city of Mosul in June 2014 (Heras 2014).

**ISIS’ tribal policies (i): learning from the past**

The appearances of a jihadist-tribal alliance of cooperation in mid-2014 should by no means be construed as a reflection of a long-standing and close relationship. In fact, the very opposite was historically more accurate. ISIS’ direct predecessor, al-Qaida in Iraq (AQI), had suffered an ignominious defeat in the latter part of the 2000s precisely at the hands of Sunni Arab insurgents and tribal militias, aided by the Coalition forces. As we shall see, this serves as a critical background for the tribal policies pursued by ISIS.

While many tribes in the Sunni Arab triangle in northwestern Iraq had initially sympathised with, and to some extent sheltered, jihadist insurgents in the early post-invasion phase, AQI quickly ruined their hosts’ hospitality. Tensions arouse over AQI’s efforts to impose Salafist dictates on local tribesmen, “uproot traditional tribal political structures”, establish liberated areas (“Islamic “emirate”), and subdue all other Sunni-Arab insurgent groups. (Fishman 2009, 3; Benraad 2011, 122). Perhaps most importantly, AQI attempted to control and tax the lucrative cross-border trade or smuggling businesses, an important source of revenue for Iraqi tribes. As Brian Fishman has noted, the Sunni Arab tribes were at the heart of the Sunni Arab insurgency in the 2000s:

These tribal groups overlapped with many of the insurgent organizations in Iraq. In some cases, self-described insurgent groups with names plastered across the internet were simply the public face for essentially tribal behavior. In other instances, tribes used insurgent infrastructure to pursue parochial interests, including chasing lucrative reconstruction contracts (Fishman 2009, 3).

As tribal grievances against AQI escalated and leading tribal shaykhs in al-Anbar province called upon them to leave the governorate, AQI responded by doubling down, declaring itself a state – “The Islamic State of Iraq” (ISI) – demanding subordination and pledges of loyalty from all insurgent groups, factions and tribes in the Sunni Arab triangle. The
purpose of ISI – AQI in its new incarnation – “was to bully those tribal and insurgent ‘constituents’ to submit to its leadership”, by appealing to Islamic traditions prohibiting rebellion against true Islamic rule (Fishman 2009, 6; see also Tønnessen 2015).

The results were meagre, however. ISI claimed that a number of tribal shaykhs had joined ISI and its immediate precursors, but in reality, their tribal support base was dwindling. Over the next few years, however, several dozen Sunni Arab tribes and insurgent groups join a new tribal militia force, mostly referred to as “Sons of Iraq” or the “Sunni Awakening Councils” (or Majalis al-Sahwa), which drove al-Qaida out of its stronghold in the Anbar province, and decimated the previously formidable jihadist group (see e.g. Benraad 2011; Whiteside 2018). In the short term, the setback was dramatic with only a fraction of ISI’s fighters remaining in 2008.

From this low point in 2008, however, the jihadists slowly rebuilt their organisation, and when doing so, they drew important lessons from their debacle at the hands of Sunni tribes and their allies. Realising the importance of building relationships with the Sunni tribes, the latter being a critical “population pool over which al-Qaida and the government [...] competed”, ISI adapted its ideological posture to the socio-political realities of Iraq, and began pursuing “a more pragmatic approach towards the tribal factor” (Cigar 2011: xiii). From now on, the organisation worked painstakingly to devise a comprehensive strategy, based inter alia on tribal “ethnographic” activities and intelligence gathering, to better understand the weaknesses of tribal structures in Iraq and identify entry points to penetrate and subvert the tribes (Whiteside and Elallame 2020).

Hence, in its new incarnations in the late 2000s and early 2010s, ISI (later renamed ISIS in 2013 and finally IS in 2014) revamped and calibrated its tribal policies moving beyond the single-minded focus on coercion. To be sure, violence was still a vital part of the toolbox. In fact, ISI continued and even escalated its revenge campaign against Sahwa militiamen, in addition to intimidating and killing Sunni Arab leaders to deprive the tribal areas of focal points for opposition to a renewed jihadist incursion (Benraad 2011, 121). At the same time, the jihadists also sought to “develop a deeper base of popular support for its caliphate project”, by capitalising on the mounting Sunni anger over Nouri al-Maliki government’s discrimination of Sunni Arabs (Whiteside and Elallame 2020, 2019). Seeking to amplify these resentments, ISI developed an information campaign targeting local audiences with “a skillful manipulation of emotional scripts”, in which the Shiites were vilified, often in ways similar to “pre-Islamic traditional slam-poetry, called hija”, where tribes would insult each other in songs and chants’ (Whiteside 2019: 8). Against the background of rising grievances towards a government ruled by politicians who openly pursued anti-Sunni policies, the propaganda campaign found fertile ground.

ISIS built on their experiences of its predecessors to finetune its political subversion campaign among the tribes. Not only did ISIS thread more carefully in the economic sphere, avoiding encroaching upon the traditional tribal smuggling business, which had aggravated AQI’s relationship with Iraqi tribes in the Anbar province. Through its courts and justice system ISIS also inserted itself as a factor in inter-tribal affairs by becoming an instrument for social groups seeking to reclaim rights, retrieve lost properties or reverse past wrongdoings. Although current rebel governance scholarship tends to be dismissive of ISIS’ outreach to civilians (e.g., Bamber and Svensson 2022, 8–9), there is some evidence that ISIS in Syria, through its police and court administration, sought, at least initially, to win some goodwill by addressing and resolving local disputes (Khalaf 2015, 60–61). In this
regard, they resembled the Taliban’s shadowy court system, whose role was critical in preparing for Taliban’s victory (Provost 2021, 139; Giustozzi and Baczko 2014, 199).

In tribal disputes, however, both ISIS and rival jihadist groups in Syria sometimes came to be seen as useful allies in conflict over access to resources. According to one of the interviewees for this study, when the al-Nusra Front gained control over the highly profitable oil wells in Dayr al-Zawr, this was widely seen not as an al-Nusra undertaking but the work of Abu Kamal clan members [of the al-‘Uqaydat tribe], using al-Nusra as a front organisation.\(^6\) As a result, “part of al-Baqir clan [a rival clan of the same tribe] allied themselves with Daesh” hoping to strengthen its hand in the competition over oil resources (Interview with F, 2021). This account receives corroboration from Tabler (2018) who observed that tribesmen “have jumped on the Islamic State bandwagon to maintain leverage” vis-à-vis al-Nusra allied tribesmen in Dayr al-Zawr: ‘the al-Baqir, Abu Kamal, and al-Shaitat [clans of the al-‘Uqaydat tribe] – were all drawn into the JN-IS struggle, even as their true interests centred on keeping their oil proceeds (Tabler 2018, 6). It is important to notice, however, that after having ousted the al-Nusra Front and finally consolidating its territorial control in Dayr al-Zawr and elsewhere, ISIS ceased jockeying for tribal support and “grabbed the power from everybody” (ibid).

A primary objective in ISIS’ tribal policies was to prevent a revival of the Sahwa mobilisation. This goal became all the more easy by the gradual withdrawal of US combat troops from Iraq between 2009 and 2011 and the al-Maliki government’s decision to disarm Sunni militias and scale back government support to the Sahwa forces. Unsurprisingly, this prompted disaffected Sunni tribesmen to drift back into the ranks of the Sunni insurgency (e.g. NRP 2010). By 2011, the number of former Sahwa tribesmen rejoining al-Qaeda was estimated to be in the thousands. At the end of the 2000s, several dozen Sahwa tribesmen were assassinated on average each month, making the choice of “rejoining al-Qaeda or helping the group […] the best way to avoid becoming the victims of its assassinations” (Benraad 2011, 123–124). In 2010, a local Sahwa tribal militiaman in Diyala described with much bitterness how they were being let down:

> The security forces have hit at the Sons of Iraq, detained them, insulted them, using sectarian words, and taken their weapons without any reason and without a warrant. The future of the Sons of Iraq, in my opinion, is either that al-Qaeda kills us or we end up in jail. […] The Americans did not betray us. They sentenced us and our families to death. They supported us in fighting al-Qaeda, but then suddenly they left us caught between two enemies – al-Qaeda and Iran (cited in NRP 2010).

After the ISIS conquest of Mosul in 2014, the Sunni Arab tribes also faced the dilemma of having nowhere to flee since the Baghdad government responded by blocking off the Sunni Arab areas to prevent ISIS infiltration (Ignatius 2015, 84). Against this background, it was no surprise that ISIS faced relatively meek tribal opposition when it gradually consolidated its power and control over Sunni Arab heartland of Iraq after 2011. Coercion and threats were not the only factors explaining this outcome, however.

**ISIS’ tribal policies (ii): many carrots, a few deadly sticks**

At the height of ISIS campaign of military conquest in 2013–2015, a series of video-taped ceremonies were published online by pro-ISIS media agencies, all of them showing tribal
councils in Syria and Iraq where Sunni Arab tribal shaykhs ostensibly pledged allegiance to ISIS and its emir and Caliph, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi. The videos stirred much media debate about whether the tribes now had sided decisively with ISIS in the ongoing civil war, or whether the shaykhs had been coerced (e.g. Sowell 2015). While many eyewitness accounts suggested the pledges took “place under duress and by force of arms”, there were clearly more to it than brute force. At the very least, ISIS found it necessary to mobilise a whole range of incentives to tribesmen to encourage them to support or join ISIS, including a variety of material rewards and political concessions, such as amnesties to former Sahwa militiamen. Furthermore, ISIS formed institutions to organise and streamline its policies vis-à-vis the tribes in all its territories in Syria and Iraq, making ISIS rule more predictable. Finally, ISIS courted tribal leaders, by granting them local autonomy and honouring them at tribal gatherings, in general elevating their status in return for loyalty.

Before discussing these incentives in more details, it is important to underline that these incentives occurred within the context of extreme brutality, which ISIS meted out against its adversaries. Hence, ISIS’ upgraded tribal policies, when compared to those of its predecessors, included not only more incentives, but also a more intensive display of unprecedented fear-inducing violence (Hashim 2018; Ashour 2021). Following a speech by Abu Muhammad al-Adnani in January 2014 in which he exhorted “all the Sunni tribes in all provinces to prevent their sons from continuing to serve in, or entering, the Safavid army, the police, or the Awakening, and to repudiate those who insist on this and not protect or harbor them, or demand their blood”, ISIS began making real on its threats. The first mass killings event took place in the Syrian Dayr al-Zawr province, where tribal fighters from the Shu’aytat (Shaitat) clan had launched counterattacks against ISIS after Shu’aytat clan leaders initially had pledged allegiance to ISIS, reportedly under duress. The exact circumstances leading up to the tragedy in early August 2014 are somewhat confusing (Fernandez 2015; Dukhan 2021), but end the result was a frightening spectacle of murder and atrocities:

Over a three-day period, vengeful fighters shelled, beheaded, crucified and shot hundreds of members of the Shaitat tribe after they dared to rise up against the extremists. The little-publicized story of this failed tribal revolt in Abu Hamam, in Syria’s eastern Deir al-Zour province, illuminates the challenges that will confront efforts to persuade those living under Islamic State rule — in Iraq as well as Syria — to join the fight against the jihadist group, something U.S. officials say is essential if the campaign against the militants is to succeed. The Abu Hamam area has now been abandoned, and many of the bodies remain uncollected, offering a chilling reminder to residents elsewhere of the fate that awaits those who dare rebel (Washington Post 2014).

A similar “object lesson in raw terror”, to borrow an expression from Fernandez (2015), was the ISIS massacre of Albu Nimr (al-Bu Nimr, part of the Dulaymi tribe) tribesmen near Hit in the Anbar province of Iraq, in late 2014. The clan’s militia, whose members had previously enlisted for the Sahwa militias in the late 2000s, had fought ISIS forces until they “ran low on ammunition, fuel, and food” and their pleas for resupplies from Baghdad were reportedly ignored (e.g. Stout 2014). In what was to become one of the largest jihadist massacres in Iraq, several hundred tribesmen were rounded up and executed by the jihadists. For ISIS, it was important to take on the Albu Nimr sub-tribe as the latter had prided itself for being “the first tribe to kill [jihadists in Iraq]” and had sought military
cooperation with the U.S. forces in the Anbar province as early as 2004 (Wolf 2015). Adding insult to injury, ISIS subsequently released propaganda material, featuring photos of dozens of humiliated Albu Nimr tribesmen, seeking “repentance” in the presence of ISIS fighters and pledging allegiance to ISIS’ self-appointed “Caliph”, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi. Throughout the ISIS Caliphate, reports of killings of tribesmen came to the fore in news media or via ISIS propaganda channels from time to time. The scale of the killings, however, never matched those of the Shu‘aytāt and Albu Nimr tragedies which underscored the exemplary and “educational” effect these massacres were meant to have on the tribes. ISIS also released footage of repentance and allegiance ceremonies, which were clearly designed to humiliate traditional tribal shaykhs and demonstrate the impotence and subordination of the elderly shaykhs vis-à-vis the young militants of ISIS (see e.g. Lia 2017).

Deterrence based on fear only was only one aspect of ISIS tribal policy, however. In fact, ISIS had also many carrots in its tribal policy toolbox, clearly based on the realisation that coercive repression was a too costly strategy, which might risk a repetition of the failure of al-Qaida in Iraq in the late 2000s. First, ISIS established institutional channels for dealing with tribal concerns. While forming a tribal affairs department (Diwan al-shu’un al-‘asha’ir-iyya) may sound more like a means of asserting tighter bureaucratic control over the tribes, and to some extent, that was the case. The office was tasked to “gather[…] information on the tribes and their daily activities” (Dukhan, Al-Hamad, and Shaar 2021). As Charles Lister has noted, it probably enabled ISIS to better “anticipate and carefully respond to the complex tribal dynamics of Iraq and Syria.”

Still, such offices also made it easier for tribesmen to raise concerns and file complaints with the new ISIS administration. The fact that ISIS strove to streamline its bureaucracy across the provinces and demonstrate the efficiency and fairness of its new “governance” helped make the Tribal Affairs office more relevant and useful to tribesmen who lacked family ties or close connections to leading tribal shaykhs and power brokers. The Tribal Affairs departments also organised traditional councils (majalis) and ceremonies with tribal leaders in which they apparently made a point of honouring tribal traditions and rituals, and paying respect to tribal shaykhs. Many ISIS propaganda videos show ISIS militants fraternising with tribal shaykhs and pledging to defend their land and honour from Shiite militias and government forces. A sample of 14 such ISIS videos from Syria and Iraq in the 2013–15 period, studied in detail by this author, underscore not only the importance which ISIS attached to such gatherings. They also reveal a degree of reciprocity, albeit a very asymmetric one, between the tribal shaykhs who are usually treated with great respect, and the somewhat younger ISIS militants, often of local origin, who serve tea and act as deferential hosts.

As alluded to above, ISIS judges also offered their services in mediating in tribal conflicts. Compared to traditional tribal justice, which tended to favour the strongest sub-tribe, clan or family, ISIS judges were empowered to pass judgements as they interpreted Islamic law and local customs. They were also in the position to enforce judgements in areas under ISIS control, a clear advantage in a country where the courts had been paralysed by years of unrest and civil war (see e.g. Khalaf 2015, 61–63). The new ISIS administration prioritised law and order, seeing public morality as a key aspect of their “Sharia-based” rule. In areas, such as the Dayr al-Zawr province where “a patchwork of rebel war lords” had ruled the area, prior to ISIS’ arrival, the doctrinaire Caliphate rule was
seen as an improvement, given the previous desperate situation of lawlessness and chaos (Associated Press 2014).

In one of its early media reports of tribal meetings, ISIS boasted of its governance achievements, especially in the justice sector, such as “returning rights and property to their rightful owners”, “the reduced crime rate”, and the “state of security and stability” in ISIS-controlled areas. (AlHayat Media Centre 2014). Similarly, it made sure to remove undisciplined corrupt commanders who may otherwise have engaged in outright warlordism. Although ISIS’ rule attracted Coalition air attacks, which negatively affected public safety, the imposition of ISIS rule led to reduced crime, and more predictable rules for how to stay safe, a vital improvement for civilians in a conflict-ridden society.

ISIS’ tribal affairs department could also show magnanimity and forgiveness towards former Sahwa tribesmen who repented.\(^\text{15}\) The numerous amnesty deals handed out by ISIS required, however, that none of the tribesmen reverted to pro-government militias. Hence, the threat of reprisals should some tribesmen defect and rejoin the opposition to ISIS, appears to have been a forceful deterrent, preventing Sunni tribes from rising up against ISIS rule until the latter had already been militarily defeated by the Coalition and Iraqi security forces (e.g. Dettmer 2016).

**ISIS’ tribal policies (iii): material incentives**

In addition to providing public order in tribal areas previously ignored by state authorities, ISIS also sought to buttress popular support in tribal areas by offering a range of material incentives. At one early tribal council in Syria, convened by ISIS in mid-2014, the jihadists claimed to have “pump[ed] millions of dollars into services that are important to the Muslims” and “ensur[ed] the availability of food products and commodities in the market, particularly bread” (AlHayat Media Centre 2014). ISIS further required from “the tribal dignitaries” at the council to start “collecting the zakah” and presenting it to the zakah offices located throughout the province and “[p]reparing lists with the names of orphans, widows and the needy so that zakah and sadaqah can be distributed to them” (AlHayat Media Centre 2014).

These two strands of activities were characteristic of ISIS governance: these were public and religious services, which boosted ISIS branding efforts as devoted and efficient Islamic governors and they included taxation policies, which helped ISIS public finances. While many observers noted improvements in public services during the early phases of ISIS rule, the burden of constant warfare and over time, shrinking revenues, took a heavy toll on ISIS’s ability to provide public services, however. Over time, the discrepancies between ISIS propaganda videos and life under the Caliphate became more and more glaring (see e.g. Aarseth 2021). When push came to shove ISIS increasingly prioritised its loyalist constituencies, which made corruption more prevalent.

In some areas, ISIS allowed the tribes extensive autonomy, which might include everything from running their communities’ services and collecting religious taxes to keeping a substantial cut of revenues from oil wells on their territory as well as profits from the major arteries of tribal revenue, namely the cross-border smuggling between Syria and Iraq. Loyalist tribesmen were also offered weapons, vehicles, equipment, subsidised fuel, foodstuff, etc. A tribal leader from Palmyra, Syria recalls that ISIS
offer many sweeteners. They go to the tribes and say, ‘Why are you fighting against Muslims? We’ll give you weapons and cars and guns, and we’ll fight together.’ They offer diesel and fuel. They bring barley and animal feed from Iraq. They build wells at their own expense for the tribes and they say, ‘Others have neglected your needs.’ (Cited in (Associated Press 2014).

The material incentives varied from one area to another, but they all served to making it more attractive to join ISIS’ ranks for young tribesmen who otherwise would have had few opportunities in tribal society of rural Iraq. As Dukhan, Al-Hamad, and Shaar (2021) have observed, ISIS understood that the tribal structure had changed over time and that there was a younger generation that refused to accept the traditional chiefdoms. Therefore, ISIS co-opted young tribal leaders by offering to share oil and smuggling revenues with them and promising them positions of authority in the state.

Hence, ISIS combined material incentives with a conscious effort to build a new social base of ISIS supporters within tribal society, by elevating young tribesmen to positions of power and authority. In both Mosul and Raqqa, ISIS appointed youth in their twenties to top-level positions in ISIS police and security offices. (Lia 2017; Dukhan, Al-Hamad, and Shaar 2021). Time and again, ISIS’ tribal offices convened the traditional shaykhs for tribal councils to make them pay allegiance to the Caliph (e.g. Dukhan and Hawat. 2015). These assemblies were held in the presence of young ISIS militants who were often from the same sub-tribes and clans as the elders. Despite the formal niceties and tribal codes of respect and deference, the choreography bore an unmistakable message: the power now belonged to the ISIS youth. In one such ceremony, the ritual ended with the elderly shaykhs being equipped by AK-47s and dressed up with ammunition belts and combat gear before they departed awkwardly in their new military outfits.16 In short, ISIS would pay due respect to tribal dignitaries, but they would also ridicule and debase them whenever they thought this served a purpose. ISIS would also exert pressure on tribal elders to give permission to ISIS militants to marry their daughters. Such pressure created frictions with the tribes and angered local families, but ISIS was careful not to overstep the patience of the host population in this regard, recruiting instead unmarried women on a massive scale from the expanding pool of jihadist sympathisers worldwide (Cook and Vale 2018; Lia 2019).

By giving paid salaries, cars, weapons, houses, and the prospects of marriage to young tribesmen, ISIS sought not only to recruit tribesmen to its military units, but more broadly to establish an independent social base within the traditional tribal structures, in a manner not very different from the Baathist regimes’ “etatist tribalism” of the 1990s.17 Such divide and rule policies were not hard to implement, since traditional tribal society in both Syria and Iraq were riddled with internal fractures and bitter conflicts over rights and leadership roles.18 Even among ISIS’ fiercest tribal adversaries, such as the Al-Uqaydat sub-tribe, ISIS had found many recruits among competing clans. Hence, by manipulating clan hierarchies within the tribal structures, elevating loyal clans to prominence and debasing suspect or disloyal clans, ISIS sought to reshape tribal society and gradually align it with jihadist ideological dictates. By reducing the importance of age, descent, lineage and kinship, ISIS strove to make individual ideological
commitment and loyalty the new basis for social standing and upward mobility the Caliphate’s tribal regions.

**Conclusion: ISIS tribal policies and the tribal revolt that never happened**

When ISIS swept across northwestern Iraq, capturing Mosul and threatening Erbil and Baghdad, many observers pinned their hope on the Sunni Arab tribes as a possible ally in the U.S.-led Coalition’s efforts at rolling back the jihadist Blitzkrieg (Asfura-Heim 2014; Balanche 2016). One anthropologist who commented on the ISIS atrocities against defiant tribesmen was cited as stating that the tribes would not be deterred by ISIS brutality: They “are very hard to terrorize”, they “will really come back” (Chatty 2014). These hopes were quickly dashed. A large tribal revolt similar to the Sahwa mobilisation in the late 2000s did not materialise.

There were many reasons for this. First, as outlined above, ISIS had calibrated its tribal policies, having drawn many lessons from its predecessors’ defeat. The organisation had more experience with tribal society in both countries; they invested more in intelligence gathering and tribal ethnography when preparing to subvert tribal areas. ISIS integrated tribal policies into its administration by forming tribal affairs offices throughout its various provinces, and the movement allocated more resources to recruiting young tribesmen into its ranks. By skilfully manipulating tribal divisions and cleavages, ISIS were able to enlist supporters from most tribes and weakening the status and authority of traditional tribal shaykhs. Ultimately, the incentives worked well since the threat of massive bloodshed and brutal revenge always loomed large in ISIS-tribal interactions. The Albu-Nimr and Shu’aytat massacres had broadcast a frightening message to anyone contemplating a revolt.

The external context gave tribesmen little hope for success, should they start an uprising. The mistrust and lack of support from Iraqi authorities to Sunni Arab tribes had soured relations between the tribes and Baghdad since the late 2000s when the al-Maliki government sought to disenfranchise and disarm the Sahwa militias. Baghdad’s suspicion that the Sunni Arab tribes were in league with ISIS, prevented sufficient military aid to reach the tribes. The looming threat of ISIS terrorism in Baghdad led Iraqi authorities to close off the Sunni triangle and prevent tribesmen from fleeing the area when ISIS forces advanced. Baghdad chose instead to rally volunteers to the Shiite dominated Popular Mobilisation Forces (PMF) to combat ISIS, further sectarianising the anti-ISIS struggle. The international coalition led by the United States also appeared unprepared to offer material aid to the Sunni Arab tribes. As Aymenn al-Tamimi noted in 2016, “there is no large-scale actor the tribes in Syria in particular can turn to for support” (cited in Dettmer 2016).

Perhaps also a certain urban disdain – and fear – for rural tribesmen was a factor in the decision by the urban elites to let the Sunni Arab tribes down. An Iraqi observer, interviewed for this study described “the desert tribes” as “innate rebels and non-compliant to the law” (Interview with A, May-June 2021). He considered tribesmen, especially those belonging to “desert tribes” as easy targets for ISIS recruitment, precisely because they were considered unruly, but proud and chivalrous outlaws, ready to take up arms against a state controlled by decadent urban elites. Hence, ISIS sought to “harness the raid-savvy of the desert tribes during the occupation”, believing
that tribesmen longed to revive tribal traditions for raiding, which had ended more or less in the 20th century with the formation of the Iraqi state. While perhaps an apt description of ISIS’ perceptions of tribesmen, it remains of course only a narrative, not an empirical reality.

Our previous discussion on ISIS tribal policies has demonstrated, however, the ease by which ISIS manipulated the Sunni Arab tribes, alternatively cajoling and coercing them into submission, and successfully preventing a repeat of the Sahwa uprising of the late 2000s. The case of ISIS and the Sunni Arab tribes in Syria and Iraq highlights the superiority of extremist ideological rebels facing local tribal organisations. There is no reason to assume that the case of ISIS-tribal interactions is entirely sui generis from which no general insight can be gleaned. In fact, as Barbara Walters and others have argued (Walters 2017; Grauer and Tierney 2017; Lia 2005), extremist rebels today enjoy greater advantages in civil wars than was the case in the past for a variety of reasons. Not only are they aided the forces of globalisation, especially the proliferation of global media communication, cross border migration, and the proliferation of new insurgent techniques, in particular suicide tactics. The global diffusion of extremist narratives and worldviews allows external extremists to more easily recruit local supporters, arming them with a degree of socio-cultural embeddedness in local communities, and thereby sharply reducing the home ground advantage of local tribes.

Thus, ideological extremist movements become formidable adversaries for local kinship groups under conditions of civil war. It is an unequal encounter, like that of a professional heavyweight boxer and an amateur street fighter. If framed as two opposing stereotypes, the jihadist is more akin to the historical Leninist cadre, highly trained in political subversion and the techniques of covert action, while the tribal shaykh is still a village elder, whose ideological authority does not stretch beyond family lineage and whose propaganda call is merely clan legends and genealogy tales. Hence, whenever the extremist learns the local terrain, he easily subverts traditional bonds of solidarity and penetrates tribal group, drawing upon a rich repertoire of political extremist mobilisation techniques.

In the study of extremist rebel movements and their governance policies, one should therefore pay more attention to the very process of political subversion in its various forms and manifestations. Future students of jihadism and rebel governance would benefit from drawing more extensively upon the rich literature on Marxist guerrilla and insurgent tactics and theorise the “territorial methodology” of jihadism (see e.g. Zelin 2016). By making a plea for this direction, the present article also aligns with previous studies who have called for greater attention to the entire range of rebel governance models, including those with only tentative and temporary (or “liquid”) territorial control (e.g. Doboš and Riegl 2021; Hansen 2019, 17–50).

Only in 2016–17 did Sunni Arab tribes join the efforts to dislodge and defeat ISIS forces, but by then, the Caliphate’s military had been reduced to a shadow of its former strength. In August 2016, Anbar tribes in Ramadi stepped forward and pledged to banish ISIS “elements from their areas”, but this occurred only after Anbar’s provincial capital, Ramadi had been liberated (Hussain 2016). Some tribes reportedly volunteered to submit names of fellow tribesmen who had been involved with ISIS during its control over Ramadi. As most of Anbar province was liberated more tribes joined the chorus of condemnation of ISIS, pledging to disavow the group and expel families of ISIS members who failed to act
against their family members (Ahmed 2017). The involvement of thousands of tribesmen with ISIS put severe strain on tribal society as lynching and revenge attacks soared in the wake of ISIS defeat, and the Iraqi justice system failed to give tribesmen suspected of ISIS membership a fair trial. Again, the tribes were at the losing end in the battle against ISIS.

Notes

1. The first two interviews were conducted in Erbil by the author in October 2019, while the remaining five by a Lebanese research assistant in and outside of Mosul in the spring and fall of 2021. The interviewees were recruited via snowballing sampling, building on the author's contact network and that of his research assistant. Informed consent was obtained from all interviewees, and they were advised of the nature of the research and the intended use of interview material. Full anonymity was provided even though participants did not request this explicitly.


4. The “Sons of Iraq”-militias reportedly had more than 91,000 personnel under contract in 2008, according to U.S. Army Gen. David H Petraeus’ testimony to Congress, April 8 and 9, 2008.

5. The group adopted the name “Islamic State in Iraq and Syria/Sham” in 2013 and the name “Islamic State” in 2014.

6. In fact, the perception was so common that the al-Nusra Front was commonly referred to as the Jabhat al Bu Kamal (al-Jabha means Front in Arabic). (Interview with F. 2021).

7. See e.g. “مصدر: داعش يجرح عشائر الموصل على مبادئه رغم تبرعه مع القلم” Al-Sumaria News, 5 July 2014. https://tinyurl.com/2nrth2ss; and

8. Abu Muhammad al-‘Adnani، الراي لـ، الكاتب، أهل النومة الشامية @anonymous, 8 January 2014. https://justpaste.it/e103

9. Also known as Deir al-Zor, Deir ez-Zor, Deir Ezzor.

10. According to Charles Lister cited in Dettmer (2016).

11. Estimates of victims vary, with some media reports putting the figure as high as 500. See e.g. (International Business Times 2015) and (Wolf 2015).


13. ISIS appears to have limited amnesties to those who seek repentance “before they are captured”. See AlHayat Media Centre (2014).


15. During her fieldwork in Iraq, Bobseine (2019) interviewed an official in the Iraqi Ministry of Interior who oversaw “tribal genealogical documentation”, and whose biggest problem was conflicts between tribal shaykhs who were “fighting over lineage claims and not resolving case disputes themselves.” (Interview cited in Bobseine 2019).
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