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THE ISLAMIC STATE: AN ALTERNATIVE STATEHOOD?

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In the last year, an alternative model of statehood for the Middle East region has become a widely discussed topic. While the ideas of various alternative projects have appeared quite often in the 20th century (in connection with the establishment of the Palestinian state, the Kurds problem, the Third International Theory of M. Gaddafi, etc.), they occupied a marginal place and hardly ever came close to realization (it will suffice to recall the idea of democratic confederalism by A. Ocalan). However, the rapid strengthening of the Islamic State (IS) and its exoticism seem to create an impression of a sudden emergence of a real alternative.

IS formed in 2006 from the merger of eleven factions of Iraqi Al-Qaeda was little known until 2013 – the organization comprised only a few thousand people during the first years of its operation,¹ mainly former soldiers and officers from Saddam Hussein’s army. The organization’s activities were then aimed against Americans and the new U.S. Government that had conducted tough lustration to remove the Baath and the entire old elite from the political space.

The radical transformation of an ordinary jihadist group was associated, firstly, with the escalation of the Syrian conflict which destabilized the situation in Iraq due to the “transfusion” across the border and, secondly, with the rise of Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi in spring 2011 who set a course for the organization’s self-financing by robbery, expropriation of property of “infidels”, racketeering, bootlegging, etc.

IS became widely known in summer 2014, when militants seized Mosul and started aggressive attacks in Iraq and Syria.

At present, IS controls the territory in Syria and Iraq, the size of which is comparable to that of the UK, with the population of 8 million people. Tens of thousands fight for IS (according to some sources, 80–100 thousand people) from various countries of the world, including over 1,700 men from Russia (unofficial data suggest that the figure is much higher).

It is clear that the question of the nature of IS remains open; however, there are certain prerequisites which allow to consider it a state rather than just a new edition of Jihadist organization and much has already been said and written about it by now. Nevertheless, the following two questions remain the most relevant: (1) what is the project proposed by IS (if any) and (2) can IS turn out to be effective in solving key statehood-related problems in Arab countries, i.e. can it solve the nation-building

¹ *The Wall Street Journal*, June 12, 2014.

problem, overcome the fragmented nature of the societies and harmonize institutional development?

It must be noted, though, that even if it fails to solve these problems but succeeds in overcoming the obvious manifestations of the region's current statehood crisis, it can well be defined as a temporarily successful project, despite all its barbarity and cruelty.

IS Project

Proposing its own state-building project, IS continues the Salafi tradition calling the Muslim community to go back to the time of Muhammad and the rightly guided caliphs. While this general Salafi idea has always been quite popular in the Arab Muslim world, different thinkers and religious and political leaders gave it radically different interpretations.

Unlike their Muslim brothers (Tunisian Ennahda, Hamas and other Islamist organizations) that try to build their ideologies on the combination of Islamic values, nationalist ideas and democracy principles (it bears reminding that Hamas, in its time, came to power through the democratic elections), IS, same as Al-Qaeda that produced it, occupies principally anti-modernist and anti-Western positions. Therefore, the analysis of the project proposed by IS suggests referring to the early Muslim statehood model and identifying its key elements.

The problem here is that there are two ways in which statehood, as applied to the Arab Muslim political history and culture, can be understood.

On the one hand, it can imply the real statehood that existed in the region in the precolonial period.

This "real" statehood in the Arab Muslim world was of a twofold origin: on the one hand, it was generated by Muhammad's religious call, on the other, by the Arab Muslim conquest in the 7-8th centuries and the necessity to control the conquered territories and to organize administration. The ambiguity of the origin affected the structure of the Arab Muslim state and sources of its legitimacy as well as its political identity. On the one hand, it was an Islamic state for Muslims whose main institutes

were established by Muhammad and the rightly guided caliphs; the caliph's power was religiously justified; and the non-Muslim population (mainly, Jews and Christians) that was considered "protected" (*dhimmi*), had its own jurisdiction and paid special taxes. On the other hand, it was an ethnocratic state: in the Umayyad period, it was Arab, in the Abbasid period – Arab-Persian and Arab-Turkic, etc. Its rulers actively used the historical mythology to justify their claim to the caliphate, relied on tribal and ethnical groups in exercising their power, etc.

In addition to the combination of religious-ideological and ethnic tribal elements, the real Arab Muslim statehood was characterized by active naturalization and transformation of public administration practices of conquered and neighboring nations (primarily, Byzantium and Iran), their rethinking and gradual complication of the political infrastructure.

Finally, this real statehood was distinguished by a generally secular nature of institutes (as far as they might seem) and public administration methods.

Naturally, the last statement does not imply the secularity of the state but means emancipation of real political power from its religious origins. Since approximately the 10th century (the Buwaihid period) the Abbasid caliph had reserved the exclusive function to legitimate the power of real rulers – at first, Buwaihid *amir al-umara'* (commanders) and, later, Seljuk sultans.

At the same time, it can imply the concept of Islamic statehood, to which IS, in fact, refers.

This concept developed in works of Muslim legal scholars was not, in its main part, designated to describe the existence of the political reality and was not a result of it. For thinkers who elaborated it, it was not about teaching the ruler how to rule better (for this purpose, a genre of "mirrors for princes" – *specula principum* – was used) and not about explaining the power phenomenon, in which philosophers were interested, but about describing a righteous state as it had been meant by the sacred texts of Islam. It is not an accident that the key work devoted to the Islamic statehood, *Al-Ahkam as-Sultaniyyah* ("The Laws of Islamic Governance"), was written by Al-Mawardi as late as the 11th century, when a single caliphate no longer existed.

It appears that today one can identify several elements of the Islamic statehood concept, which have the most significant impact on the project proposed by IS and explain

its differences from the idea of nation state – ummah (*umma*), imam (*imam*), dawla (*dawla*), bay’ah (*bay’a*) and jihad (*jihad*).

First, IS is not a *nation* state because an *ummah*, in its medieval meaning, is not a nation. As noted by the Palestinian Egyptian thinker Tamim al-Barghouti, “physical existence of individuals is called an ummah when these individuals have an image of themselves as a collective, and when this image is guiding them to do things in certain ways distinct from others”.² Thus, in contrast to a nation, in its “biological” sense, an ummah is not a natural phenomenon. It is, however, is not an imaginary community resulting from the socio-economic development of the society either – in contrast to the “social” meaning of a nation. An ummah, which implies spiritual and ideological affinity, may be determined by neither its settlement territory, nor its numerousness (prophet Ibrahim was initially an ummah just by himself), nor its political organization. If the sense of nationhood requires the acquisition of statehood, the ummah will need political arrangements solely due to practical necessity but the absence of the state will not result in its degradation or disappearance.

However, on top of everything else, an ummah is a community following its *imam*, whose function is cardinally different from that of a leader of a nation state: “Imamate is to replace (*li-caliphate*) prophecy in the defense of faith and the administration of the world (*ad-dunya*)”, al-Mawardi wrote in the 11th century.³

The imam (in the Sunni theory) is neither a sovereign, nor a legislator, nor a judge. He is rather a coordinator whose aim is to watch over the observance of interpretations of the sacred texts recognized by the community of religious and legal scholars, an administrator, a teacher and a role model for Muslims following him along the path of faith and, thus, forming an ummah. It is for this very reason that the absence of the imam weakens the ummah and renders it incomplete.

In political terms, al-Mawardi identifies the ten main functions of the imam and this list corresponds, more or less, to the entire Sunni tradition. Most of these functions, although requiring political action, have religious justification or designation: to ensure religious lawfulness, to apply punishments established by God to defend the rights of believers, to protect the House of Islam (*Dar al-Islam*), to fight those who refuse to become Muslims, to raise taxes (in accordance with the Islamic Sharia), to appoint believers and law-abiding men to official posts, to manage the ummah and to protect faith. In addition,

² Al-Barghouti T. *The Umma and the Dawla: The Nation State and the Arab Middle East*. L., 2008. P. 39.

³ Mawardi, al-Hasan Ali Ibn Muhammad Ibn Habib al-Basri al-Baghdadi. *Al-Ahkam as-Sultaniyyah*. Cairo-Damask-Amman: Al-Maktab al-Islami, 1996. P. 13.

there are two purely administrative duties: to ensure border regions and to determine the treasury revenue and expenditure in a reasonable manner; and one purely religious – to support religion⁴.

In the Sunni tradition, the imam may not be elected but should be appointed directly by his predecessor or the community of religious scholars or should seize the power.

Although the imam is a leader of an ummah rather than a state (*dawla*), he, in fact, acts within the framework of the latter.

However, IS is not a nation *state* also because a *dawla*, in its medieval sense, is actually not a state. *Dawla* is a secular organization of the ummah, from which it receives its legitimacy. In the classic period of the Islamic history, to which the spiritual sentiment of IS refers, *dawla* meant primarily a dynasty but not a territory. *Dawla* is an initially temporary and sufficiently flexible establishment, which is not territorial but its sovereignty cannot be called its characteristic because, belonging to God, it is delegated by God to the ummah, by the ummah – to the imam, and by the imam – to rulers of lower ranks. As a result, *dawla* constitutes a polity, or a potestary system, which is, in principle, multi-leveled and capable of organizing itself based on the network principle. Thus, for example, the Abbasid caliphate was a *dawla* (and, by the way, it was called not caliphate but Abbasid *dawla*, or House of Islam), but *dawla* represented kingdoms of Tulunids, Tahirids, etc., included in it and the Volga Bulgaria which had no actual connections with it was viewed by Baghdad as a part of this *dawla*, because it was the Abbasid caliph who was the source of its legitimacy.

In the modern world, *dawla* is not usurped by IS – in a certain sense, the southern regions of Libya controlled by Hezbollah, the Palestinian territories controlled by Hamas and internal areas of the “great” Sahara controlled by nomadic tribes, all constitute a *dawla* within the medieval meaning of the term. Having a considerable political independence, they certainly weaken the nation statehood in the region.

A critical element of the IS statehood is *bay'ah*, an oath of allegiance given by certain social groups and individuals to the imam. It is *bay'ah* that ensures the connection between the ummah and imam and its real sovereignty. Furthermore, *bay'ah* exists in modern Arab monarchies, ensuring a traditional legitimacy of rulers.

Finally, as to *jihad*, in accordance with the ideas of Al-Qaeda in Mesopotamia

⁴ Mawardi... P. 29–31

described in their well-known document “Our Ethos and Our Program” and following the radical Salafi tradition, it is understood as an armed combat with those who refuse to convert to Islam, being a personal duty of each Muslim and one of the principles of religion (*Usul ad-Din*). Therefore, a refusal to be engaged in jihad results in *takfir*, an accusation of apostasy.

Thus, the political order proposed by IS should, a priori, be free from certain weaknesses of the existing model of statehood. In theory (but not in practice), the Islamic State may not have problems with incompleteness of the nation-building project because it rejects the very idea of nation. It also seems unable to have problems with the legitimacy deficit and the sovereignty because its legitimacy comes from God and its sovereignty covers the entire Muslim ummah. As for institutional development, the fragmented nature of the society and other problems faced by modern states in the region, they are questions of political practice rather than religious theory.

The Model Implementation

In pursuance of establishment of tough control over the territories, IS must earn loyalty of the local population and, hence, perform robust social activities (payment of salaries, charitable campaigns, construction of infrastructure facilities, law enforcement, etc.). The fact that IS brings, although very cruel and distorted but still understandable, order based on the well-known rules, ensures that it will receive support from the population (its survived portion) tired of anarchy and war chaos.

Social activities force IS to improve the structure and methods of administration. Thus, al-Baghdadi was proclaimed a caliph, he has two deputies, a cabinet of ministers and rules of twelve vilayets are subordinated to him. The active participation of former officers from Saddam’s elite enables the organization’s leaders to use their administration experience.

At the same time, religious elements take a considerable place in the management structure: Consultative Council (*shura*), which verifies the administration’s decisions for their compliance with the Sharia principles as well as Sharia court and Council of Muftis.

Many modern government institutes in IS obtain religious interpretation – for example, IS social services are managed by the Department of Muslim Services, etc.

Eventually, it can be stated that in the process of its institutional establishment as a state, IS synthesizes elements of a nation state and the archaic nature of Islam,⁵ which make it neo-modernist⁶.

If in institutional terms such synthesis allows to build a certain imitation of a real statehood, in other terms it creates new controversies.

Thus, the idea of territorial statehood (in Syria and Iraq) in IS is naturally coherent with the non-territoriality of *dawla*, because many jihadist groups all over the world declared themselves subjects of the caliph al-Baghdadi and IS branches. While the nature of relations between the IS of Iraq and Syria and its branches is not quite clear, they can be described within the paradigm of the relations ummah-dawla and, in a completely Western manner, as franchising.

The duality of territorial identity of IS results eventually in the split of the organization into pragmatists oriented towards the strengthening of the political entity in a limited territory and romanticists pursuing indefinite expansion. However, such a split can hardly be viewed as a factor weakening IS, because the organization has an evident opportunity to export romanticists to the IS branches all over the world.

The combination of the archaic values and modern in solving the nation-building problem is not any less bizarre. On the one hand, the Islamic egalitarianism, the idea of ummah unity forces IS to foster prevention of the ethnic and tribal heterogeneity of the society in the territories it controls (naturally, after all infidels have been eliminated). On the other hand, solving the problem through confessionalism creates new split lines.

⁵ *Until now, we did our best to avoid the word “archaic”. In this context, the “archaic nature” is understood not as a synonym of “tradition” but rather as an antithesis of all binary opposition “tradition-modernity” which seeks to create something new by imitating the imaginary past. Thus, Nazism was archaic because it revived antique myths in Europe of the 20th century, the Salafi are archaic because they seek to materialize their own ideas of the Islamic ancient times, destroying thereby all traditional norms of modern societies. See, inter alia: Zvyagelskaya I. D. Archaicism and Conflicts in the Middle East//Conflicts and Wars of the 21st century. Middle East and Northern Africa. Moscow, 2015.*

⁶ *“Similar to post-modernism, neo-modernism is sceptic and eclectic, it permits co-existence of the modernity and archaic style and even archaicism of the modernity and updating of archaics. However, in contrast to post-modernism, it does not declare a full refusal to speak positively and, as modern once did, feels the burn of positivist fire and strives for the truth, even if does so through the conflicting values of the archaic times and modern” – Zvyagelskaya I.D., V.A. Kuznetsov. The Problems of Statehood in the Middle East//Free thought (Svobodnaya Mysl), No.4, 2015. <http://svom.info/entry/579-problemy-gosudarstvennosti-na-blizhnem-vostoke/>.*

All these bizarre and quite modernist entwinements are supplemented by active information activities of IS aimed to spread the organization's influence in the world.

Thus, today the Islamic State is only able to solve the problem of external manifestations of the statehood crisis – to restore institutes and to renew the socioeconomic contract between the society and the state, to reinforce its sovereignty over the limited territory and solve the border-related problem. At the same time, it is obvious that none of these problems has been fully solved and it is not necessarily the case that it can be solved within the framework of the built model.

Thus, the created institutes and economic basis of the social contract, being as exotic as they are, may be solutions for the time of *jihad* and continuous expansion; however, to maintain daily living activities of a normal state they must be reviewed. Of course, there is a certain irony of history here, because to achieve this ISIL members will have to repeat the path of the Umayyads and the early Islamic statehood in general, the creation of which as a statehood and not as a conquering polity was connected with the cessation of expansion during the Abd al-Malik caliphate. At that time, as it is known, the inability to adjust resulted in the Abbasid revolution and the split of the Caliphate.

It is also not quite clear how the sovereignty issue is addressed today – *bay'ah* is still quite a weak instrument of reinforcement for partially modernized societies. It is clear that, at the first sight, the IS government can control a certain (and considerably large) territory; however, it is unknown how deeply and strictly they control it. It makes the statement of sovereignty even more doubtful, given that the state is not recognized by the world community (as it is recognized as a terroristic organization).

Finally, as for the borders and territorial and administrative order, the network structures, franchising systems and non-territorial nature certainly sound very romantic. However, in practice one can speak of the true Islamic State only in the Syrian and Iraqi territory. For other territories, it is still about certain branding, which in each individual case reveals a unique situation. Thus, for example, in Libya the Islamic State is, in its essence, a convenient form of self-presentation and consolidation of a number of small tribes. In fact, the unity of the Syrian and Iraqi area also raises many doubts, including the Iraqi domination in the IS administration structure.

Finally, the situation in IS with solving the deep problems of statehood is even worse.

The idea of a united Islamic nation is certainly poetic, however it can be attractive only for a limited number of enthusiasts, mainly, from the Western Islamic pseudo-ummah,⁷ but it takes no account of the existing regional identities, which, in real social practices, are usually more important than confessional. Furthermore, insofar as it relates to the Syrian and Iraqi population, they are forced to join IS to avoid horrible conditions of war and merely they have no choice. The situation is the same with young people from many Arab countries who join IS not to fight for religious ideas but due to the disappointment in their own states. “There is no justice, no freedom, no future” – the words one can hear from youngsters of poor regions of Tunisia who have decided to join IS where they think they can find all this. In this discourse, freedom and justice are understood quite specifically – as freedom from humiliation on the part of the state and involvement with it.

Thus, these young people believe that IS provides the opportunity to overcome social and political fragmentation – IS elites do not usurp the power, they are authentic. However, in practice, it has so far been achieved solely through repressions and genocide of social groups while the need in development, reinforcement of the sovereignty (if IS survives and with all other “if’s” realized) and institutes will dictate reinforcement of the repression apparatus torn off from the society to an even greater extent than in other Arab countries. So, it is most likely that overcoming the fragmented nature of the society will also be problematic.

Finally, regarding institutes, today in IS we observe the creation of government institutes with a full vacuum of civil ones. Such a situation can continue only during the war.

Nevertheless, despite all obvious weaknesses of IS as a state-building project, one cannot deny that for a certain number of residents of the region’s countries it is very attractive. In all appearances, this attractiveness is associated, mainly, not with the confessional nature of the state itself and, certainly, not with the cruelty of its policy but with the above-described apparent authenticity of IS.

⁷ Roy O. *Globalized Islam: The Search for a New Ummah*. London: Hurst & Company, 2002.

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