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The Islamic State and the Sunni Community

Beyond Material Support: Promoting ISIL Accountability for Atrocity Crimes

Drawing primarily on the Islamic State's own literature, internal documents and the testimony of defectors, this study explores the Islamic State's relationship and interaction with the Sunni communities in Iraq and Syria over which it ruled. While the Sunni community is the larger identity in-group whose interests the Islamic State claims to represent and uphold, not all those who claim affiliation with Sunni Islam are considered as such by the Islamic State, but rather are deemed 'apostates' (i.e. those who have left Islam) who could be killed and have their property confiscated.

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Introduction: Recalling the In-Group/Out-Group Framework

In an earlier paper, I analyzed the Islamic State's treatment of various kinds of 'out-group' communities: namely, the Yezidis (an 'original disbeliever' out-group); the Christians (an 'original disbeliever' out-group considered 'People of the Book' and thus entitled to 'protection' from the Islamic State subject to paying a poll-tax and abiding by various restrictions); and the Shi'a (an 'apostate' out-group).[1] These 'out-group' identities are to be contrasted with the broader 'in-group' religious identity community which the Islamic State (like other jihadist groups) claims to represent and whose interests it claims to uphold: namely, the Sunni community, normally referred to as the 'People of the Sunna and the Jama'a' (Ahl al-Sunna wa al-Jama'a).

This does not mean that formal membership of the Islamic State is required to be considered part of the Sunni community in the Islamic State's eyes, but rather that the Islamic State claims to be the protector, defender and proper political representation of the broader population of those it considers to be Sunnis. In other words, to borrow JM Berger's framing of in-groups and out-groups in extremist worldviews, the Islamic State as an organisation is the in-group proper, while the Sunni community in general is the 'eligible in-group' in that the Islamic State claims to represent and advance this broader identity group's interests, and (adult male) members of the Sunni community are eligible for formal membership of the Islamic State.[2]

This paper explores in further depth what the Sunni community's status as the eligible in-group meant for its relationship with the Islamic State during the era of the territorial caliphate in Iraq and Syria (2014-2019). Sunnis are often not properly recognised as victims of the Islamic State and detailed investigation of their status under the Islamic State has often been neglected in documentation and justice and accountability efforts, which have concentrated more on 'out-groups' like the Yezidis. In addition, Sunnis who lived under the Islamic State are at risk of being collectively tarred by association with Islamic State on account of the shared religious identity. Yet as this paper will show, Sunnis could also be victims of great harm at the hands of the Islamic State. Primarily drawing on the Islamic State's own literature, internal documents and testimonies of dissidents-turned-defectors, this study examines the Sunni community-Islamic State relationship in two parts. First, it considers the Islamic State's approach to determining Sunni identity and how it judges broader populations of those who claim affiliation with Sunni Islam. Second, it examines how the Islamic State deals with those who claim such affiliation but are considered by the Islamic State to have apostasised by virtue of specific beliefs and/or actions.

Determining Sunni Identity

Although the Islamic State, as discussed previously, can be considered an extremist group by virtue of how its worldview postulates that the survival and success of Muslims can never be separated from hostile action against various kinds of disbelievers with a view to converting,

1 Aymenn Jawad Al-Tamimi, "The Islamic State and its Treatment of 'Out-Groups': A Comparative Analysis," Center for Justice and Accountability, September 2023 (https://cja.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/09/Al-Tamimi_theislamicstateandoutgroups.pdf).

2 For issues of membership of the Islamic State, see my other paper in this collection, "Membership of the Islamic State and Other Forms of Involvement."

subjugating or killing them (depending on the types of disbelievers), the group itself nonetheless claims that its teachings reflect the authentic 'middle' path of Islam that rejects both excessive laxity and 'extremism' in the other direction. This ostensible middle ground includes the question of determining who is to be considered a Muslim. The understanding of who is a Muslim for the Islamic State is best understood from its official manifesto of beliefs entitled "This is our 'aqida[3] and this is our manhaj,"[4] released online by the Islamic State's al-Himma Library.[5] It is in fact only a slightly modified version of a document that was published online in 2005 by al-Qa'ida in Iraq, a direct predecessor of the Islamic State.[6]

The document highlights that identity as a Muslim essentially has a positive component and a negative component. The positive component means affirming the pronouncement of Tawhid (Islamic monotheism)- that is, there is no deity but God- and complying with the conditions and rights of God stipulated by the pronouncement. In other words, one must acknowledge worship of God alone and no other, while also affirming that the Prophet Muhammad is His Messenger, and adhering to the religion of Islam. The negative component of the identity is the *absence* of 'nullifiers' of Islam (Arabic: nawāqiḍ al-Islām): that is, beliefs, pronouncements and actions that supposedly invalidate one's Islam even if one claims affiliation with Islam.

The concept of 'nullifiers' of Islam, as conceived by the Islamic State, is derived from the Wahhabi trend in Islam, and the importance of the nullifiers in Islamic State creed is illustrated by the fact that the majority of the 'Course in Tawhid'- a textbook that was used to instruct recruits in the religious training camp as part of the joining process- is mostly devoted to detailing the nullifiers of Islam.[7] Ten main nullifiers of Islam are given, and they entail a range of offences including simple idolatry (e.g. actually worshipping something besides God); placing intermediaries between oneself and God; not declaring idolaters to be disbelievers (or doubting their disbelief or otherwise deeming their religion valid); supporting a system of rule through man-made laws; sorcery; and aiding disbelievers in their fight against Muslims.

Thus, if, to the Islamic State's knowledge, someone professes adherence to Islam, ostensibly shows adherence to Islam, and does not commit a nullifier of Islam, then that person is to be considered and treated as a Muslim, with the person's true inner thoughts being something for God to determine and judge. In the Islamic State's view, this method of judgement is to be applied regardless of whether the land in which the person lives is deemed an abode of Islam (that is, an abode in which the rulings of Islam are supreme and implemented) or an abode of disbelief (that is, an abode in which non-Islamic rulings are supreme and implemented). The Islamic State contrasts this view with those it attributes to 'extremists' who declare all those dwelling in an abode of disbelief to be disbelievers.[8]

3 Creed.

4 Methodology/program.

5 For an overview and translation with annotations, see "This is our Aqeeda and This is our Manhaj: Islam 101 according to the Islamic State," aymennjawad.org, October 27, 2015 (https://www.aymennjawad.org/2015/10/this-is-our-aqeeda-and-this-is-our-manhaj-islam).

6 For a copy of this earlier document, see this forum posting on August 30, 2005 (https://paldf.net/f/node/32555).

7 For a complete translation and overview, see "Islamic State Training Camp Textbook: "Course in Monotheism"- Complete Text, Translation and Analysis," aymennjawad.org, July 26, 2015 (https://aymennjawad.org/17633/islamic-state-training-camp-textbook-course-in).

8 "This is our Aqeeda and This is our Manhaj: Islam 101 according to the Islamic State." See also the case of the Islamic State West Africa province's dispute with the breakaway faction under Abu Bakr Shekau. Among the alleged extremist beliefs of Shekau were his willingness to declare anyone in an abode of disbelief to be a disbeliever and that the original principle (Arabic: aṣl) in people is disbelief. See "The Islamic State West Africa Province vs. Abu Bakr Shekau: Full Text, Translation and Analysis," aymennjawad.org, August 5, 2018 (https://aymennjawad.org/21467/the-islamic-state-west-africa-province-vs-abu).

What this means practically is that when the Islamic State takes control of a town or locality whose population generally professes Sunni Islam (e.g. Mosul or Raqqa), then the Islamic State considers that population to be Muslim regardless of which faction or entity previously controlled that place. Whether an individual or group of individuals within that population is judged to have fallen into apostasy depends not on whether the individual or group of individuals makes an open show of support for the Islamic State and declaration of allegiance to its caliph, but rather on avoidance of committing nullifiers of Islam in the Islamic State's eyes.

It is noticeable in this regard how the group's propaganda did not broadcast displays of mass rallies of the populations in Iraq and Syria under its rule and declarations of allegiance by them to the group's leader, unlike the emphasis on mass rallies in the propaganda of other totalitarian regimes. Instead, the negative component of the in-group identity created a strong incentive for Sunni civilians living under the group's rule to simply keep a low profile and display outward conformity with the group's rules on everyday living, without necessarily having to make public declarations of allegiance to the group's leader or formally join the organisation. Put another way, keeping one's silence would have proved to be a good survival tactic. Further, just because an individual or group within that population might have fallen into apostasy in the group's view, it would not have followed that the entire population was to be similarly judged. Rather, in general, the wider population professing affiliation with Sunni Islam and not seen as having committed a nullifier of Islam is deemed Muslim.

The Islamic State uses more than one designation to refer to this wider population: namely, the 'subjects/citizens' (Arabic: ru'iya) of the Islamic State or the 'Muslim masses' (Arabic: 'awwam [al-]muslimin). Thus, in terms of rights before the law, these wider populations should be on the same standing as Islamic State members and their families. This worldview also stipulates a colour and ethnic-blind philosophy in terms of those considered Muslim, with no preference supposed to be given to Arabs over non-Arabs. The only issue on which ethnicity matters is the position of the caliph himself, who must have lineage from the same tribe as that of the Prophet Muhammad (the Quraysh) as one of the criteria for eligibility.

Grounds for Apostasy

While the Islamic State does consider the wider Sunni populations over which it seeks to rule to be Muslims and thus part of the eligible in-group, it is also the case that the nullifiers of Islam are quite extensive and thus afford multiple grounds for many individuals claiming affiliation with Sunni Islam to be declared apostates. For example, virtually all forms of Sufism would be considered apostasy for purportedly amounting to "greater idolatry that takes someone outside the path by seeking help in those besides God and praying to those besides God, and deifying the figures of authority and shaykhs of the paths."[9] By extension, this would mean elimination of any factions associated with Sufism, such as the Ba'athist Iraqi insurgent group *Jaysh Rijal al-Tariqa al-Naqshbandiya* ("Army of the Men of the Naqshbandi Order"- JRTN), which was often thought to be a key actor in an 'alliance of convenience' with the Islamic State during the latter's surge across northern and western Iraq in 2014. Ultimately JRTN proved

9 See e.g. Fatwa no. 556 (undated) from the fatwas issued on al-Bayan Radio. See similarly Fatwa no. 808, which advises removal of satellite television from the home because it encourages "doubts of disbelief" such as "advocating Christianity, atheism, democracy, socialism or Sufism of the grave."

to be a marginal actor that was quickly suppressed by the Islamic State, with its members defecting, fleeing or being eliminated by the group.[10]

Likewise, the earlier mentioned statement of the Islamic State creed affirms that "secularism" in its various forms and manifestations- such as nationalism, communism and Ba'athism- constitute "manifest disbelief nullifying Islam, taking one outside the path." Logically, this would mean that Sunni members of the various Iraqi political parties that were active in areas seized by the Islamic State would have been deemed apostates. Similarly, affirmations against Ba'athism and nationalism would have provided sufficient reason for the Islamic State to eliminate JRTN.

In a similar vein, since the various governments ruling the Muslim world today are deemed apostate because they do not rule by God's law and espouse ideologies and views deemed by the Islamic State to be contrary to Islam, then it follows that members of the security and military forces of those governments would be deemed apostates. As a list of notices and rules regarding 'migration' to the Islamic State issued by the Hijra Commission in 2014 makes clear, all the rulers of modern Muslim states and their armies are considered to be guilty of disbelief and apostasy,[11] a point that has been reinforced by the group in its propaganda. This contrasts with what the Islamic State sees as the deviancy of other actors like al-Qa'ida (itself deemed an apostate movement by the Islamic State) for supposedly distinguishing between the rulers and the soldiers that fight for them. In the Iraq context, for example, Sunni members of the Iraqi police, army, 'Sahwa' tribal councils (Sunni Arab tribesmen who fought against the Islamic State's predecessors, supported by the Americans and the Iraqi government and with roots going back to 2005) , or (at the present time) Sunni members of Hashd groups and largely Sunni Hashd groups, and Sunnis who work in the government administration would be considered apostates. Craig Whiteside has suggested that an Islamic State strategy of targeting Sahwa movement figures for assassination was a factor of some significance in the Islamic State's rise across Iraq.[12]

The Islamic State itself advertised tactics of targeting Sunni 'apostates' working for the Iraqi government and security forces in its 'Clanging of the Swords' video that came out shortly before the group's summer offensive that captured Mosul and other towns.[13] Two scenes of note in the video are as follows. In one scene entitled "the Sahwa hunters assault the home of an evil leader of the Sahwa," Islamic State fighters disguised as Iraqi security forces raid the Sahwa leader's home and arrest him and his son, forcing them to dig their own graves before executing them. Another scene is entitled: "Sahwa hunters terrorise the heads of disbelief in their homes." This scene features another raid by Islamic State fighters disguised as Iraqi security forces on the home of a Sahwa leader, who is then taken and executed. The Sahwa leader, initially thinking that the men are members of the security forces, emphasises to them that he "fought against terrorism," and video footage is shown of the Sahwa leader's collaboration with the Iraqi government. Just before killing him, the Islamic State fighters ask

10 Conversation with a relative in Mosul during late 2014. See also e.g. Specimen 38F in Archive of Islamic State Administrative Documents. The document is part of a list of various people arrested early on by the Islamic State (July-August 2014) following the group's takeover of Mosul. Included among the arrested are two "Naqshabandis" and a "Sufi."

11 "General Rules and Regulations for Foreigners Seeking to Join Islamic State (Iraq and Syria/2014)," Islamic State Archives, July 30, 2023 (https://islamicstatearchives.com/2023/07/30/general-rules-and-regulations-for-foreigners-seeking-to-join-islamic-state-iraq-and-syria-2014/).

12 Craig Whiteside, "The Islamic State and the Return of Revolutionary Warfare," Small Wars & Insurgencies, 27:5, pp. 743-776.

13 "Clanging of the Swords Part 4," Jihadology, May 17, 2014 (https://jihadology.net/2014/05/17/al-furqan-media-presents-a-new-video-message-from-the-islamic-state-of-iraq-and-al-sham-clanging-of-the-swords-part-4/).

the Sahwa leader if he knows who they are. He replies that he does not, and then they reveal their true identity to him and kill him.

One of the earlier noted nullifiers of Islam is supporting disbelievers to fight against Muslims. Thus, armed factions claiming affiliation with Sunni Islam and fighting against the Islamic State –particularly those known to have received support from disbelieving entities like the United States or 'apostate' states like Turkey– are deemed apostate factions. In the Syria context, for example, such a judgement would apply to all the Syrian rebel groups that have fought against the Islamic State.[14] In a similar vein, any Sunni living in Islamic State territory and cooperating with an enemy to undermine the group- for example, by supplying information to the U.S.-led coalition to launch airstrikes against Islamic State targets- would be deemed an apostate and would be executed by the group.[15]

Potential Consequences for Apostates: Execution and Confiscation of Property

Like the Shi'a, Sunnis who are deemed apostates by the Islamic State are not entitled to rights to life and property under the group: that is, they cannot be afforded any toleration as apostates. The most ghastly manifestation of Islamic State mass killing of Sunni 'apostates' was the suppression of tribal resistance to its rule in eastern Syria and western Iraq: namely, the resistance put up by Sha'itat and Albu Nimr tribesmen respectively,[16] with the death toll from each of the two tribal groups likely going into the hundreds at least.[17] UNITAD (The United Nations Investigative Team to Promote Accountability for Crimes Committed by Daesh/ISIL)- a UN body that was set up under a United Nations Security Council resolution in 2017 and whose mandate came to an end in September 2024- has done some specific investigative work regarding the Albu Nimr tribe and its interactions with the Islamic State.[18] According to UNITAD, members of Albu Nimr were part of the Sahwa phenomenon in 2007 and in 2014, Albu

14 One brutal example of the treatment meted out to members of rival factions can be seen in the Islamic State Damascus province June 2015 video "Repent Before We Gain Power Over You," in which members of the insurgent group Jaysh al-Islam, which fought against Islamic State, are executed on camera by beheading. See "New video message from the Islamic State: Repent Before We Apprehend You- Wilayat Dimashq," Jihadology, June 25, 2015 (https://jihadology.net/2015/06/25/new-video-message-from-the-islamic-state-repent-before-that-we-can-appreciate-upon-you-wilayat-dimashq/).

15 One of the more notorious examples was the execution of various spies in a Ninawa province video released in 2015, including one set of spies put into a car that was then blown up with a rocket launcher, another set drowned alive, and a third bound and blown up with explosives. See "New video message from the Islamic State: If you return {to sin}, we will return {to punishment}- Wilayat Ninawa," Jihadology, June 23, 2015 (https://jihadology.net/2015/06/23/new-video-message-from-the-islamic-state-but-if-you-return-to-sin-we-will-return-to-punishment-wilayat-ninawa/). The video was clearly intended to have a deterrent effect on locals and warn them against collaborating with the group's enemies and apostasy offences more generally. See also the publication "Clear lines of evidence for the disbelief of the one who supports the Crusader campaign Against the Islamic Caliphate," al-Himma Library, Dhu al-Hijjah 1435 AH (September-October 2014).

16 See e.g. "Iraq: Sunni tribe 'left for slaughter' by Islamic State," BBC, November 10, 2014 (https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-29984668).

17 In a report on the Sha'itat massacre, a leading member of the Shai'tat martyrs association is quoted by Syria TV as giving a documented death toll of 900 people, but the real death toll likely exceeds 1200 people. See "On its seventh anniversary…testimonies of survivors of the Shai'tat massacre recount its details," Syria TV, August 15, 2021 (https://www.syria.tv/%D9%81%D9%8A-%D8%B0%D9%83%D8%B1%D8%A7%D9%87%D8%A7-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B3%D8%A7%D8%A8%D8%B9%D8%A9-%D8%B4%D9%87%D8%A7%D8%AF%D8%A7%D8%AA-%D9%86%D8%A7%D8%AC%D9%8A%D9%86-%D9%85%D9%86-%D9%85%D8%AC%D8%B2%D8%B1%D8%A9-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B4%D8%B9%D9%8A%D8%B7%D8%A7%D8%AA-%D9%8A%D8%B1%D9%88%D9%88%D9%86-%D8%AA%D9%81%D8%A7%D8%B5%D9%8A%D9%84%D9%87%D8%A7).

18 "Factsheet: ISIL (Da'esh) Crimes against the Sunni Albu Nimr Tribe," UNITAD (2021-2023). Accessed here: https://www.unitad.un.org/sites/www.unitad.un.org/files/general/sunnis_albu_nimr_tribe_factsheet_en_0.pdf.

Nimr tribesmen were among local forces opposed to the Islamic State's rise in Anbar province. By October 2014, the Islamic State had overrun the Albu Nimr tribe's areas in Anbar, and on the orders of the group's leadership in Anbar, hundreds of male members of the tribe were captured and executed. Most of those captured and killed had been members of the Iraqi police, military, or Sahwa, or were relatives of these people. This suggests that the basis for the killing of these people was that the Islamic State considered them apostates. This is also corroborated by UNITAD's finding that many members of the Albu Nimr tribe had their property confiscated or destroyed.

There are also internal documents that attest to the execution of apostates and/or confiscation of their property. For example, one document from the Islamic State's 'Raqqa province' and issued in June 2017 features the certification of a Tunisian judge's ruling (Abu Hudhayfa al-Tunisi) stipulating the execution of a woman on account of apostasy, without asking for her repentance, and the confiscation of her wealth as "booty" for the "Bayt Mal al-Muslimin" (i.e. the Islamic State's treasury).[19] Unfortunately the precise offence that led to her condemnation for apostasy is not specified.

However, another document gives an example of a more specific offence deemed apostasy and mandating the death penalty and confiscation of the accused's wealth. Specifically, a document recovered by the local Syrian outlet Zaman al-Wasl is a letter dated May 27, 2015 from the group's security department in Aleppo province to the Islamic State governor of 'Dar al-Fath' (the group's name for the locality of Dayr Hafir), requesting the handover of an individual being held in a security prison in Manbij. The individual is accused of having a "connection with the shabih" (i.e. collaboration with the Syrian government) and accordingly he is to be executed and his wealth is to be confiscated.[20] In a similar vein, the 'ISIS Files' collection of Islamic State contracts for renting out agricultural land to locals in the Ninawa region featured some agricultural lands that had been confiscated from 'apostates' who were not in the group's territory.[21]

The Opportunity for 'Repentance' and Violations of Promises

However, in the case of Sunnis deemed to have apostatised, it would appear that a contrast with the treatment of the Shi'a is that the Islamic State afforded avenues for at least some of them to 'repent' of their apostasy and be considered Muslims. The concept of 'repentance' for apostasy and acceptance of repentance is a well-established *general* principle in Sunni Islam: essentially, it means making a declaration of regret and renunciation of one's behaviour that led to the apostasy, seeking God's pardon and forgiveness for the offence.[22]

19 Specimen 42X in Archive of Islamic State Administrative Documents (https://www.aymennjawad.org/2016/09/archive-of-islamic-state-administrative-documents-3). See also "Confiscation of property of someone executed for apostasy: al-Ra'i area," Islamic State Archives, March 13, 2023 (https://islamicstatearchives.com/2023/03/13/confiscation-of-property-of-someone-executed-for-apostasy-al-rai-area/).

20 Specimen 36C in Archive of Islamic State Administrative Documents (https://www.aymennjawad.org/2016/09/archive-of-islamic-state-administrative-documents-2).

21 Devorah Margolin et al., "You Reap What You Sow: The Importance of Agriculture to the Islamic State's Governance Strategy," George Washington University Program on Extremism, June 2021 (https://isisfiles.gwu.edu/downloads/765371328?locale=en).

22 See for example, "The acceptance of the apostate's repentance and interpretation of the verse in Al Imran: 'Their repentance will not be accepted,'" Islamweb.net, May 27, 2021 (https://www.islamweb.net/ar/fatwa/442471/%D9%82%D8%A8%D9%88%D9%84-%D8%AA%D9%88%D8%A8%D8%A9-%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%85%D8%B1%D8%AA%D8%AF-%D9%88%D8%AA%D9%81%D8%B3%D9%8A%D8%B1-%D8%A2%D9%8A%D8%A9-%D8%A2%D9%84-%D8%B9%D9%85%D8%B1%D8%A7%D9%86-%D9%84%D9%86-%D8%AA%D9%82%D8%A8%D9%84-%D8%AA%D9%88%D8%A8%D8%AA%D9%87%D9%85).

This 'repentance', if performed, allows for the person to be considered as having returned to fold of Islam and thereby evade the most severe punishments for apostasy (i.e. execution).

The Islamic State essentially took the principle of repentance for apostasy and offered it as an amnesty avenue for Sunnis it deemed guilty of apostasy in areas it took over or tried to take over. The group began advertising the possibility of repentance prior to the declaration of the Caliphate: that is, when it was still officially the 'Islamic State in Iraq and al-Sham.' In particular, the spokesman Abu Muhammad al-Adnani issued a speech in January 2014 where he offered the chance for Sunni politicians and Sunni members of the military and security forces to repent and hand in their weapons to the Islamic State before the group should "gain power" over them (i.e. before they should be formally apprehended). If they repented, they would be granted security by the Islamic State:

"We call on all the remaining Sahwa members without exception, and all the politicians claiming affiliation with the Sunnis to repent, announce that they will refrain from waging war on the mujahidin and disavow supporting and aiding the hateful Rafidites [Shi'a], and likewise we call on all policemen, soldiers and all those affiliated with the secret and public Safavid security apparatuses to repent and hand in their weapons and equipment to the Islamic State. Whoever of them does that before power is gained over him, he will have a covenant of security from us, and we do not seek recompense or equity from him, regardless of what he has done previously. As for the one who insists on remaining in the ranks of the Sahwa of betrayal, cuckoldry and collaboration, or the filthy army or police, and all who ally with them or aid them in the war on the mujahidin, their blood is permissible to be shed."[23]

This pronouncement meant that in areas of Iraq where the Islamic State gained control, it was possible for Sunni members of political parties or the security apparatuses and others who might have otherwise been deemed to have fallen into 'apostasy' to come forward and declare their repentance in exchange for preservation of their life and wealth. In a similar vein, in areas of Syria that the Islamic State seized from insurgent rivals, it was possible for members of insurgent factions and those Sunnis who had served in the Syrian army to come forward and 'repent.'[24] Yet internal documentary evidence suggests that 'apostates' who had 'repented', while regarded as Muslims, nonetheless faced some restrictions in their freedom of movement and activity. For example, a document from Ninawa province listing conditions of repentance noted that the one repenting required someone from the tribal elders to vouch for the repentance.[25] In addition, the one repenting had no right to possess or carry weapons and could not transfer residence address without the Islamic State's knowledge. The one repenting similarly could not travel outside the areas of the sector in which he resided without authorisation from the Islamic State. The repenting policeman was required to hand in a Glock pistol, while the soldier would be required to hand in a rifle. Violation of terms would result in execution and confiscation of wealth.

23 "And the leader does not deceive his people," al-Furqan Media, January 2014.

24 See e.g. Specimen 11W, announcing the opening of a repentance office in the Manbij area (https://www.aymennjawad.org/2015/01/archive-of-islamic-state-administrative-documents). It should also be noted that the repentance principle has been applied beyond Iraq and Syria. For example, in May 2017, the Islamic State's Sinai affiliate issued a statement clarifying that it only fights those who have fought it or aided the fight against it, with an openness to accepting the repentance of the one who repents before power is gained over him. See Specimen 38Z in Archive of Islamic State Administrative Documents (https://www.aymennjawad.org/2016/09/archive-of-islamic-state-administrative-documents-2).

25 Specimen 33U in Archive of Islamic State Administrative Documents (https://www.aymennjawad.org/2016/09/archive-of-islamic-state-administrative-documents-2).

However, despite the supposed guarantees of security for those who 'repented' of apostasy, evidence that primarily comes from Islamic State dissidents-turned-defectors (represented principally in the online outlets of al-Turath al-'Ilmi and al-Wafa' media foundations)[26] points to inconsistency in the policy. In particular, a self-described former amni (security official) from Ninawa going by the name of Abu Muslim al-Iraqi has accused the Islamic State of breaking its pact of protection for repenting apostates.[27] He alleges that an order came to arrest former Iraqi security officers who had repented, with these former officers then being referred to a judge in Mosul who ordered for them to be killed. Abu Muslim gave the example of an army captain called Basim Jihad al-Obaydi, who was from Abu Muslim's home region of al-Ba'aj and had been stationed in the Sinjar area. According to Abu Muslim, this person returned to al-Ba'aj and repented, but months later he was arrested, transferred to Mosul and killed there.

Another order to arrest repenters was issued for those who had been members of the provincial councils, with Abu Muslim giving the example of Radif Hammad al-'Afin, whose removal from the Ninawa provincial council on accusations of collaborating with the Islamic State and subsequent execution were reported in local media.[28] According to Abu Muslim, Radif 'repented' and had been received by Abu Muslim, settling in the Ba'aj area. However, he was subsequently transferred to Mosul and executed. Abu Muslim argues that these sorts of betrayals of those who had repented were generalised policies and not merely isolated cases. Finally, he highlights the policy of confiscating a Glock pistol from policemen who had repented, or forcing them to pay a $2000 fine if they did not have one.

There are good reasons to believe that Abu Muslim is who he says he is, because some of his information has been corroborated by internal records. In particular, in another article he wrote describing the flaws in Islamic State's military tactics, he named a division and some battalions that were mentioned in internal records obtained by CTC.[29] In addition, his testimony on repentance policies is corroborated by a leaked judiciary report from March 2015 on the issue of "repentances in the eastern provinces" (i.e. the Iraqi provinces of the Islamic State).[30] In this report, it was noted that while sincere repentances from all Sunni 'apostates' were initially accepted in accordance with Adnani's directive, an orally-transmitted decision was then issued whereby certain categories of (Sunni) apostates could not have their repentances accepted, such as those who were members of provincial councils or those who worked in the SWAT or intelligence services, and if their repentance had already been accepted, then it was permissible to betray and kill them. While some Islamic State provinces did not go along with this policy, in Ninawa, Salah al-Din and Dijla provinces, the denial of repentance

26 For background, see Cole Bunzel, "Ideological Infighting in the Islamic State," Perspectives on Terrorism, Volume 13, Issue 1 (https://pt.icct.nl/sites/default/files/import/pdf/bunzel.pdf). In summary, a trend of more 'moderate' dissidents emerged within the Islamic State. They came to believe that 'extremists' had gained too much sway over the organisation, despite the leadership making concessions to more 'moderate' positions on issues of takfir (declaring someone to be a disbeliever). Eventually, these dissidents would defect from the organisation.

27 "Opposition to Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi: The Testimony of a Former Amni," aymennjawad.org, May 21, 2019 (https://www.aymenn-jawad.org/22715/opposition-to-abu-bakr-al-baghdadi-the-testimony) .

28 E.g. See post by Atheel Alnujaifi, September 12, 2015 (https://www.facebook.com/AlnujaifiAtheel/photos/a.503664116386085/934836763268816/?type=3&paipv=0&eav=AfZN0m_1d_rF7cHjQowpQI9R8p8vDANEH9BLisNcjfqgIiz-2vBxvlKCvpq9PXzOos9A&_rdr).

29 "Opposition to Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi: The Testimony of a Former Amni (II)," aymennjawad.org, September 29, 2019 (https://aymennjawad.org/23303/opposition-to-abu-bakr-al-baghdadi-the-testimony) .

30 "An Internal Report on Islamic State 'Repentance' Policies in Iraq," aymennjawad.org, July 9, 2019 (https://www.aymennjawad.org/22914/an-internal-report-on-islamic-state-repentance).

policy was not only implemented but broadened to include other categories such as those who were candidates for parliamentary and provincial elections from 2009 onwards, and even those who had been officers of the Saddam-era 'Quds Army'.[31] Finally, further testimony from a former member regarding 'repentance' policies notes that in the Islamic State's 'Euphrates province'[32], people who had repented were summoned by the security department ostensibly on the grounds of verifying their status, but subsequently many of them disappeared in custody.[33] Apparently, there was an attempt by the Islamic State judiciary to investigate this matter, but the investigation was blocked by the security and media departments, aided by 'al-Hajj Abdullah' (who subsequently succeeded Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi as caliph following Abu Bakr's death in an American raid in October 2019).

Evidence compiled by UNITAD as an extension of its investigations into the killing of Albu Nimr tribesmen would also appear to corroborate allegations of Sunnis who repented under Islamic State subsequently being disappeared and executed by the group.[34] Specifically, UNITAD notes that so-called *mustatabin* were Sunnis who had repented under Islamic State, but that many of them were "killed for the same reasons they repented from." UNITAD notes that this observation applies "to a broader group of Sunni tribes, including the al-Salmani, al-Karbouli, al-Hardani, al-Obaidi and al-Mahalawi tribes" (all tribes of note in Anbar province). Unfortunately, it appears that this investigation was only preliminary in nature, but it corroborates the lines of evidence from the dissidents-turned defectors.

Destruction of Sunni Cultural and Religious Heritage

A final issue to touch on is the Islamic State's destruction of Sunni cultural and religious heritage, which is often overlooked amid the focus on the group's destruction of cultural heritage sites in places like Palmyra. The rationale for destroying these sites is broadly the same as the one behind destroying cultural heritage in Palmyra: anything the group considers to be an object for human worship is to be rejected as idolatry and destroyed. The most notable example of this destructive approach to Sunni cultural and religious sites can be seen in the group's destruction of multiple shrines of various pre-Islamic prophets in Ninawa province-something that the group boasted about in an article in al-Naba' in 2016, noting how locals were supposedly misled by traditions surrounding the shrines, and quoting some locals as thanking the Islamic State for its actions.[35]

Some more elucidation on the issue of what Sunni cultural and religious heritage would be liable to destruction by the Islamic State is provided in a statement by Abu Ali al-Anbari (a leading Islamic State figure and ideologue) regarding a purported tomb of Suleyman Shah (the

31 Ibid.

32 An Islamic State province that spanned the borders of Iraq and Syria along the Euphrates River in western Anbar and eastern Dayr al-Zur provinces.

33 "Opposition to Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi: Testimony on 'Repentance' Cases in Wilayat al-Furat," aymennjawad.org, October 26, 2019 (https://aymennjawad.org/23413/opposition-to-abu-bakr-al-baghdadi-testimony-on) .

34 "Factsheet: ISIL (Da'esh) Crimes against the Sunni Albu Nimr Tribe," UNITAD (2021-2023).

35 "Stories and fantasies preserved by the people about idolatrous graves and pilgrimage sites destroyed by the Islamic State," al-Naba' issue 20, pp. 12-13. Accessed here: https://jihadology.net/wp-content/uploads/_pda/2016/03/the-islamic-state-22al-nabac84_-newsletter-2022.pdf. The article also notes destruction of religious sites of the Shi'a in the Ninawa region.

grandfather of the founder of the Ottoman Empire),[36] which was located in an area of Syria that was a formal Turkish enclave and was surrounded at the time by the Islamic State. The purported tomb site was destroyed in February 2015 as a precautionary measure by Turkish troops and moved to prevent the Islamic State from trying to attack and destroy it.[37] However, the upshot of Anbari's statement was that the site would not necessarily have to be destroyed.

According to Anbari, controversy regarding the status of the building led the Islamic State to form an investigative committee to look into the building's status. The building could be one of four things: (i) a mosque built over a tomb, (ii) a tomb with a dome on top of it, (iii) a plastered tomb, or (iv) a museum without a tomb. If it came under any of the first three categories, then the site would be considered a violation of Islamic law and thus one would have to destroy it. However, Anbari made clear that the building was not in fact a mosque, nor was it a tomb with a dome on top or a plastered tomb; in fact, it was not to be considered a tomb at all, because no one was buried there, but rather it constituted a mere memorial site. On the basis of the four categories alone then, the Islamic State would not have to destroy the site.[38]

However, there remained the question of whether one should destroy it in order to shut off a potential avenue to idolatry: in other words, to destroy the site as a precautionary measure against idolatry. Yet given that the building was not a site dedicated to figures who might be accorded religious veneration such as a Sufi imam or a companion of the Prophet but rather a political figure, and the place where Suleyman Shah was killed did not have any of the "phenomena of sanctification and glorification that are normally found in shrines of veneration, for the on-site Turkish guards' shoes are present inside the buildings- which is something that the Turks don't do in shrines sanctified among them and upon which there are domes."[39]

On the basis of Anbari's reasoning, it can be seen that the Islamic State would not necessarily destroy all Sunni cultural or religious heritage. An old mosque simply renowned for its age and having been built by a Sunni historical figure and not containing a shrine of any sort- such as the al-Nuri mosque in Mosul reputedly built by Nur al-Din al-Zinki, and where Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi made his first video appearance in July 2014- would not have to be destroyed. Indeed, the group would not have made use of it as the site of Baghdadi's video appearance at all if it had considered the site to offer any basis for idolatry. In this regard, the Islamic State's reported destruction of the renowned minaret of the mosque in 2017 was likely not an ideological act of rage against idolatry, but rather reflected a scorched earth policy and a bid to spite the Iraqi forces retaking the area. In some instances, the Islamic State even advertised historical heritage as part of its propaganda idealising its territorial caliphate. A clear example of this is a photo series the group's Aleppo province media office released about Qalʿat Najm ("Najm's fortress") in the Manbij area.[40]

36 Abu Ali al-Anbari, "Statement on the so-called tomb [/shrine] of Suleyman Shah," al-Turath al-Ilmi (printed: 2018), pp. 1-21.

37 "Who is Suleyman Shah and why is his tomb so important?" The Telegraph, February 22, 2015 (https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/europe/turkey/11428005/Who-is-Suleyman-Shah-and-why-is-his-tomb-so-important.html).

38 "Statement on the so-called tomb [/shrine] of Suleyman Shah," pp. 7-13.

39 Ibid. p. 16.

40 "Photo report 16: Qalʿat Najm in the town of Manbij," Aleppo province media office, May-June 2015.

Conclusion

It can be seen from this survey of evidence that Sunnis generally should have received better treatment by the Islamic State than other religious communities on account of the fact that the Islamic State claims to represent and uphold Sunni identity, with Sunnis being the 'first-class' citizens of its state project as opposed to 'tolerated' disbelievers who would have second-class status. It is also true that the Islamic State is not necessarily the most extreme group on the jihadist spectrum in terms of how it decides whether populations and individuals claiming affiliation with Sunni Islam should be considered Sunni. However, the group's espousal of nullifiers of Islam and the various ways in which someone claiming affiliation with Sunni Islam might be deemed to have fallen into 'apostasy' meant that many Sunnis were deemed 'apostates' by the group and liable to being killed and/or having their property confiscated if they did not 'repent.' Further, it is apparent that many of those who did 'repent' were subsequently betrayed by the group, in moves that proved controversial even within the organisation.

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