

Violence and gender politics in forming the proto-state “Islamic State”

Brown, Katherine

DOI:

[10.1093/oso/9780190644031.001.0001](https://doi.org/10.1093/oso/9780190644031.001.0001)

License:

None: All rights reserved

Document Version

Peer reviewed version

Citation for published version (Harvard):

Brown, K 2018, Violence and gender politics in forming the proto-state “Islamic State”. in S Parashar, JA Tickner & J True (eds), *Revisiting Gendered States: Feminist Imaginings of the State in International Relations*. Oxford University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1093/oso/9780190644031.001.0001>

[Link to publication on Research at Birmingham portal](#)

Publisher Rights Statement:

Published by Oxford University Press

<https://global.oup.com/academic/product/revisiting-gendered-states-9780190644031?lang=en&cc=gb#>

General rights

Unless a licence is specified above, all rights (including copyright and moral rights) in this document are retained by the authors and/or the copyright holders. The express permission of the copyright holder must be obtained for any use of this material other than for purposes permitted by law.

- Users may freely distribute the URL that is used to identify this publication.
- Users may download and/or print one copy of the publication from the University of Birmingham research portal for the purpose of private study or non-commercial research.
- User may use extracts from the document in line with the concept of ‘fair dealing’ under the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act 1988 (?)
- Users may not further distribute the material nor use it for the purposes of commercial gain.

Where a licence is displayed above, please note the terms and conditions of the licence govern your use of this document.

When citing, please reference the published version.

Take down policy

While the University of Birmingham exercises care and attention in making items available there are rare occasions when an item has been uploaded in error or has been deemed to be commercially or otherwise sensitive.

If you believe that this is the case for this document, please contact UBIRA@lists.bham.ac.uk providing details and we will remove access to the work immediately and investigate.

Keywords: gender; Islamic State; proto-state; violence; Daesh; religious nationalism

This chapter explores the idea of the so-called Islamic State, also known as Daesh, as a proto-state. A proto-state operates in an environment of extreme instability but also, like the nucleus of an atom, manages to generate cohesion and structural integrity while constantly in flux. Because of this condition, and despite rejecting both nationalism and statehood in Islamic State's rhetoric, this chapter argues that Daesh remains dependent on both. This is demonstrated by exploring the ideal-figure types of the "Muslimwoman" and the "warrior-monk," and through understanding the organized public violence on the streets of its territory. The chapter reveals how these both transcend and depend upon nationalism and statism to create forms of authority and legitimacy for Daesh.

Chapter 11

Violence and Gender Politics in Forming the Proto-state “Islamic State”

Katherine E. Brown

The so-called Islamic State, also known as Daesh, highlights the fragility of statehood as a construct for international relations. While scholars have developed ideas about quasi-states (Jackson 1993), failing states, weak states, and collapsed states (Rotberg 2011), postcolonial states (Clapham 1996; Chatterjee 1993), and de facto states (Pegg 1998) to explain forms of political organization that do not fit neatly into the standard Westphalian story of statehood (Sharma and Gupta 2006), these concepts fail to account for the “Islamic State.” Islamic State rejects statehood at two levels. First, statehood is “man-made” as opposed to divine, and therefore an illegitimate and insufficient mode of governance, and Islamic State offers the alternative of the caliphate. Second, statehood depends upon false identities of race and nationality; instead Islamic State asserts a globalized claim for loyalty based upon the idea of the *umma* (community of Muslims). It therefore proposes a worldwide borderless mode of governance that is distinct from a “world government” or “world state.” Preexisting terms that qualify statehood and are rooted in territory are therefore insufficient in this case, but despite Islamic State’s actions and propaganda that assert a transnational mode of political organization, at the level of the everyday and the domestic there are clear institutional attempts at state building. In an arena of extreme competition for loyalty and authority, its policies on policing, taxation, marriage, and education build clearly specified identities of

membership in the group and demonstrate its authority, in ways that mimic statehood. Such practices might lead us to revisit ideas about “good governance” and “ungoverned spaces” given these locations are seen to generate terrorism and regional insecurity (Clunan and Trinkunas 2010). Yet Daesh governs a territory; it is not lawless or unorganized. An alternative is to see Islamic State as rebels, insurgents, guerrillas, or terrorists, regardless of its state-like capacities or claims to territorial control. Islamic State certainly terrorizes and threatens the stability and security of those who do not, or cannot, submit to its rule—both globally and locally—and therefore might be conceptualized as simply a violent rebellious nonstate actor. But its globalized agenda is not merely transnational in operational violence (as al-Qaeda aspired to project) but offers an alternative vision of everyday living and politics (Brown 2015). Seeking an explanation for Islamic State in ideas about governance or rebellion therefore seems incomplete. Instead I propose understanding Islamic State as a “proto-state.”

The term “proto-state” has recently entered the lexicon of international relations and security studies to describe Islamic State (Lia 2015; Belanger-McMurdo 2015; Gaub 2016). However, analysts are simply using the term as a synonym for “nascent” or “emerging” state, with little understanding of the term’s anthropological and etymological roots (Giustozzi 2003). This chapter explores these origins. In anthropology, the term “proto-state” denotes a highly unstable and yet cohesive environment (Diamond 1996). Within a proto-state, emerging centers of power are antagonistic to local and traditional ways of life, and are seeking to wrest authority and wealth away from existing structures to new ones. Charrad (2001), for example, has shown how in the Middle East, nation building and state formation involved a contest for

power between patrilineal-based kinship networks and centralizing postcolonial states. Importantly, this contest was not to the advantage of women in the region. In a postcolonial environment, where this battle for power was presumed, new emergent centers of power also challenge formal state structures (Araoye 2012). In violent competition with both the local and national, these emerging centers of power manage to coalesce and cohere, much like the nucleus of an atom. They develop a structural integrity while being in a perpetual state of flux. These entities occupy the conceptual space between states and nonstate actors (Szekely 2016) and become proto-states, permanently “emerging” and never truly fixed. Indeed, were they to achieve permanence or apparent viscosity, they would collapse. One limitation of existing work on proto-states is that there is little explicit consideration of how gender affects these processes, given substantial feminist insights into the operation of statehood in international relations (Weber 1994; Peterson 1992a). In the original *Gendered States* volume, we see how feminist interrogations of state creation revealed the importance of gender patterns in the interlocking imperatives of state-making: centralization of political authority, accumulation, militarism, exploitation, and legitimation (Peterson 1992a). Additionally, we can see how gender inequality is sustained by the core ideas that legitimate the state—sovereignty, the distinction between domestic and international politics, and the fiction of the state as a person (Kanatola 2007). What is interesting is how these insights differ or are reflected in the proto-state, especially one that challenges so many of these principles and processes, as does Islamic State.

I argue that Islamic State, as an example of a proto-state, is “Schrödinger’s state”¹—simultaneously both a state and a not-state. This chapter demonstrates how

Islamic State is forced into an existential paradox—namely the tension between territorial and worldwide claims to authority. Second, and essential to understanding and exposing this existential paradox, are the ways in which gender shapes Islamic state as a proto-state.” I am introducing a more refined and gender-informed working concept of the proto-state to the field of IR, and introducing gender critique to the concept as it is understood in other disciplines.

Defining Islamic State

The origins of Islamic State are in the Jamaat al-Tawhidwa al-Jihad (The Group for Jihad and God’s Oneness), founded in 1999 and later merging with al-Qaeda and other Sunni groups in Iraq, but it really took the form we know today during the “Arab Spring” and the accompanying regional uncertainty of 2011. Then it evolved into the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant and, through establishing Jabhat al-Nusra, expanded into Syria. Attempting to merge this latter group back into its structures, in 2013 it became the Islamic State of Iraq and Al-Shams (greater Syria). Alongside this evolution and expansion, however, were disagreements with al-Qaeda. Consequently, in 2014 the two groups formally split, leading to a final rebranding as “Islamic State” (Lister 2016). In June 2014, a speech by the group’s leader, Al Baghdadi, signaled its ambitions (and importantly how it differs from al-Qaeda) by declaring it “the caliphate.” In 2015, its opponents coined the name “Daesh,” an acronym of its earlier Arabic name (Mapping Militants 2017). Acronyms are not widely used in Arabic, and it implies the group is “nonsense,” like the neologism. The term sounds similar to *daas*, which means to trample underfoot, suggesting a lack of dignity, and is used in a derogatory manner. I use the terms “Islamic State” and “Daesh” interchangeably.

The changes in name represented more than expansion in territory held by Islamic State. They also reveal ever-increasing functionality and institutionalization of governance. Al-Tamimi (2015) shows how the group set up institutions and ministries as early as 2007 even though it lacked enforcement mechanisms, and that these became meaningful and operational by 2013. During this phase, Daesh relied upon coercion and extortion to “collect taxes” from local businesses (Hansen-Lewis and Shapiro 2015) while at the same time setting up bases for recruitment through offers of employment, dispute resolution, and propaganda. Those who failed to conform or submit to its rule have been ruthlessly executed, alternative centers of authority—whether traditional tribal structures or state ones—thus being eradicated. This dual-pronged strategy meant that by 2014 it impacted all areas of everyday life. From billboards promoting “correct” Islamic dress for women, to marriage licenses, market regulation, fishing permits, agricultural crop plans, school curricula, and immunization programs, Islamic State bureaucratized everyday life and institutionalized its authority. The proliferation of rules and institutions is justified through a religious ideal—that Islam is a “way of life” and governs all aspects of one’s existence. The provision of security to live according to that way of life (*sharia*) is the basis of its claim to the caliphate. The caliphate comprises the mechanisms through which the *umma* can live “the good life” (i.e., one compliant with God’s will); it exists in a territorial space known as *dar al-Islam* (the world of Islam and peace) and is contrasted with *dar al-Harb* (world of war). Consequently, the caliphate depends upon transnational ideas of citizenship (*umma*) and of governance (*sharia*) while necessarily being rooted in place (*dar al-Islam*) where the institutions of governance (as the caliphate) are operational. This is its existential paradox—both dependent on, and denying, “territory.”

Postdeclaration Daesh still controls approximately 65,000 square kilometers (Gutowski 2016), with a population of approximately 6 million and formal membership of between 20,000 and 100,000 people (Institute for the Study of War n.d.; Gartenstein-Ross 2015). Its members' violence is infamous for its ruthlessness and its spectacular nature; it is estimated that between 19,000 and 30,000 people have died at the hands of Islamic State, and around 3.2 million people have been internally displaced or are living as refugees (Norwegian Refugee Council 2016; New York Times n.d). In early 2016 Islamic State appears to have been unable to sustain its territorial control, losing approximately 14% of its territory (Johnson 2016) and its Arabic-language magazine reports that it "can to return to the desert" in order to regroup if it is forced to do so. Setbacks are framed as confirmation of the impending apocalypse, which will see the group's final victory after a wave of defeats, and it insists that the caliphate transcends territory.

Given Islamic State's violent competition with local rivals and state institutions, condition of territorial flux, dependency upon a transnational citizenship, and rejection of sovereign boundaries while simultaneously controlling the daily lives of millions, imposing new laws and extracting resources, how does Islamic State cohere and maintain structural integrity? I argue that the answer lies in three extreme mechanisms of controlling gender roles. First is the construction of a "Muslimwoman" dependent upon a religious nationalism. Defined by purdah, piety, and nonviolent jihad, she transcends local culture and race, paradoxically utilizing transnational ideals to create a nationalist framework of the proto-state. Second is the creation of the "warrior-monk" built upon a militarized nationalism. He overcomes preexisting tribal allegiances for the

“brotherhood.” These two figures operate in gender-segregated but codependent imagined spaces (the latter in the “battlefield,” the former in the “home”), but they are brought together through Daesh’s public demonstrations of organized and highly symbolic, gendered violence in a third space: the street. This third mechanism redefines access, acceptable conduct, and governance of Daesh across the public and private spheres. In doing so it enforces order and cohesion by creating new centers of power in the proto-state that affect all lives regardless of membership of the caliphate. The first two mechanisms, therefore, create gender-essentialized citizens of the new proto-state formed of transnational and transhistorical ideals and made real through daily practices that locate Daesh as a particular nationalist and statist construct. The third mechanism legitimizes and reinforces Daesh’s actions and ideals in the home and on the battlefield, thereby unifying—in principle if not in practice—its areas of power and authority. These complex gender maneuvers, which hold together in tension both the rejection and the desire for nationalism and statehood, are necessary because Daesh remains trapped as a proto-state.

Mechanism 1: Constructing the Muslimwoman

For a proto-state such as Islamic State, where there are competing institutions of governance in the local environment, the ability to intertwine a new global religious narrative into everyday living is key to building power. The image of the national “woman” creates a singularly understood place of belonging, a community of kinship, a haven for family, and a home (Layoun 1992), and is very effective at achieving cohesion regardless of local divisions. This is because it builds a linkage between the mother/woman and the nation, and the man/father and the state, reinforcing citizenship

and identity (Chatterjee 1993; Walby 2006). Cooke (2008) reflects on a form of the “national woman”—the “Muslimwoman” archetype, who is characterized by modesty, motherhood, and chastity. Islamic State prioritizes a similar construction of the “Muslimwoman”—an essentially privatized ideal coalescing around purdah, piety, and nonviolent jihad (Sonbol 2005). Combined, these elements control women in Islamic State, drawing on a transnational ideal that trumps local manifestations of womanhood; yet they are also being used to create a religio-nationalist framework of the proto-state that operates to define the symbolic and physical boundaries of Daesh. For women who cannot or will not uphold this singular “Muslimwoman” ideal, the consequences are life threatening.

Purdah is “life behind the veil,” an extremely cloistered female lifestyle. The idea of purdah is to promote privacy, and through this women’s chastity and the honor of the male head of household. Purdah is important because it symbolizes the home to be protected, and is a microcosm of the state that needs to be shielded from the outside. Moreover, upholding purdah shows that homes are created in Islamic State, and that Daesh is more than a “war zone.” Maintaining purdah shows that members of Daesh live a “full life,” one that includes a “home life,” not just a fighting life. As well as placing women in a position of dependency on male heads of household, purdah demonstrates the wealth and power of those men and by extension the system in which they live. Women are thus required to carry their purdah with them when they leave the home, by wearing a niqab and gloves, to protect them from the “outside” world. Women are encouraged not to travel outside the home without need, they must be in their homes by nightfall, and a male guardian must accompany them if they are to travel any distance. While some

women have official positions in Islamic State, they are usually confined to working in the home, with roles determined by their husband's status (Yousseff and Haris 2015). Women with exceptional status are permitted additional freedoms; notably some foreign women belong to an all-female police force whose role is mainly to enforce purdah and "modest" behaviors (Winter 2015). Purdah therefore determines women's relationships in the home and in the public sphere. It homogenizes womanhood, overwriting national or local customs and differences.

Accompanying the physical manifestations of purdah is a series of feminine values that embody this lifestyle—modesty and self-sacrifice (Mahmood 2005). These combine in an overarching concept of piety—understood by Daesh as submission to sharia.² Umm Layth (a supporter of Daesh on Twitter and reportedly living there) argues that women of Daesh are "trying to build an Islamic state that lives and abides by the law of Allah." Daesh's emphasis on purdah is in accordance with its understanding of sharia and Islam as a complete way of life. It is essential to its status as the caliphate. Piety, as submission, is for women of Islamic State expressed through fulfilling God's purpose—namely becoming wives and mothers. Marriage is not linked to romance or love, but a contract that unifies the private and public lives toward a common goal (Brown 2014). Analysis of the social media accounts of seventeen female recruits to Daesh reveals that "it is ideological devotion to the creation of an Islamic state, not sexual or romantic desire, which drives these [marital] relationships" (Loken and Zeleny 2016, 17). Combining this with the idea of submission and service to the state, women of Islamic State perceive themselves as the "ultimate wives of *jihad*" (Saul 2014). Islamic State facilitates this understanding by strictly regulating marriages so that unions best serve Daesh. It

stipulates who can be a guardian for the woman in the shaping and signing of a *nikah* (marriage contract) that must be concluded in the presence of an Islamic State official. There is now a minimum dowry of US\$5,000. Daesh says it is to make marriage a serious commitment and to protect foreign women (*muhajiraat*)³ because they had asked for so little in terms of dowry in comparison to local women (Navest, de Koning, and Moor 2016; Al Muhajirat blog, July 2015). By imposing regulations on marriages, Islamic State is attempting to add layers of legitimacy by instilling a veneer of religious and state approval to the new families and kin/gender relations created by the regime. The regulations prove to followers that Allah governs their new lives even as they transgress local customs. This detailed regulation is not unprecedented; as Mackenzie writes, “The disorder that tends to come with conflict reveals the intense effort necessary to regulate sex, and construct gender identities, or protect what I call ‘conjugal order’” (2010, 205). The conjugal order within a religious nationalism project utilizes “God’s privileged code” for the new political project (Friedland 2002). Heterosexual-religious marriage, created and instigated out of loyalty, piety, and submission to the caliphate rather than from love or family ties, is thus one of the cornerstones of the proto-state.

Islamic State, like the Lord’s Resistance Army, has a political vision, which is not only to create a new caliphate, but to create a new cast of Muslims to fill it (Baines 2014). Governing the conjugal order generates a “new cast” of Muslims, defines their relationship with each other, and creates the proto-state. The universality of this gendered code of reproduction unifies an ethnically diverse population. Daesh claims that it is racially blind, and it truly represents a postracial political order. This claim is present in several videos and media, for example, in Islamic State’s online magazine *Dabiq*

("[Here] is where the Arab and non-Arab, the white man and the black man, the easterner and westerner are all brothers," issue 1, p. 7), and in a video fronted by a black American "jihadist" after Baton Rouge, who emphasizes that his skin color doesn't matter in Daesh. As part of this new cast of Muslims, interracial marriages are important in order to prove racism doesn't exist. For example, Umm Aryan of Islamic State tweeted about an acquaintance of hers: "2 of his wives are Somali and he's a revert [white] Alhumduillah no discrimination" [*sic*]. The promotion of these interracial marriages is important for the governance of the group, as in 2015 there were over twenty-five thousand foreign fighters from over one hundred different countries (UNASSMT 2015, 8).

As a result of the emphasis on piety and purdah, Islamic State has largely rejected the idea of violent jihad for women within the territorial confines of the state. Its propagandists suggest that it is possible to simultaneously uphold purdah and piety while carrying out other forms of jihad. Jihad is redefined as service. The wife of Aymen Al-Zawahiri wrote in 2009, "We [Muslim women] put ourselves in the service of the jihadis, we carry out what they ask, whether supporting them financially, servicing their [practical] needs" (Lahoud 2010). Among the six hundred or so European women who have traveled to join Daesh, we only have a few accounts of their motivations; however, Hunt (2014) argues that many are driven by a sense of service to others. One woman interviewed upon her return to Europe said, "I always wanted to live under *sharia*. . . . Besides my Muslim brothers and sisters over there need help" (Hunt 2014). Shannon Maureen Conley, an eighteen-year-old from Denver who was arrested in April 2014 on her way to Syria, claimed she wanted to be a soldier's wife and a nurse. However, outside of the territories that Daesh controls, the role of jihad for women is more complex. Living

in an environment where purdah and piety cannot be guaranteed, women are permitted to carry out violent jihad. In the same open letter cited above, Umayma al Zawahiri doesn't rule out jihad; instead she argues that "the path of fighting is not easy for women—for it requires a companion with whom it is lawful for a woman to be." It is largely posited as an act of last resort, and while women are trained in defensive combat and battlefield triage within Daesh territory, participation in violent jihad would violate purdah and therefore undermine the narrative of the group (Ali 2016; Eggert 2015). Reconciling the contradiction of women's violence being both permissible and prohibited is only possible because of Islamic State's proto-state nature.

This discussion about the "Muslimwoman" shows how the creation of this archetype by Daesh is necessary so as to manage the inherent tensions that characterize its condition as a proto-state. It shows that Daesh must craft and make "real" this "God code" and create the dominance of religion in public and private identities. This becomes evident in the proliferation of rules governing women's lives and bodies. Its interventions show that this is not an organic process; it is constantly dealing with instability, and its viscosity is temporary. Moreover, while interventions in the marriage market may create the "new cast" of Muslims, for example, they also reveal how local power structures still challenge them. The need for a minimum dowry was not only to protect *muhajiraat*, but because the *muhajiraat* were undercutting potential marriages for local women; it was also reported that local women were reluctant to marry "foreign fighters" (Speckard and Yayla 2015). Daesh has had to create a transnational religious identity by creating the "Muslimwoman" to override local and radical politics. Additionally, in acknowledging

the potential violence of women while limiting it to the peripheries of the state, Daesh reveals that the caliphate both seeks and transcends territory.

Mechanism 2: The Warrior-Monk

Although Daesh attempts to demonstrate that it is “more than” a fighting force to affirm its claims to the caliphate, the structure of the organization, the hero worship of fighters almost to point of deification, the daily privileges afforded to military personnel, and other signs of militarism all show the limitations of this assertion. In a condition of extreme competition for allegiance and authority, Islamic State must enforce its dominance continually, over both the Iraqi and Syrian military, and over local forms of patriarchy. One mechanism that competes against both is its exposition of the ideal Muslim man. In Daesh, the ideal Muslim male is the “warrior-monk,” and he epitomizes a militarized religious nationalism. The term “warrior-monk” is more common in Buddhist nationalisms (Adolphson 2007); here it combines ideas of heroism and publicly performed piety. The warrior-monk is a variation on the combination of “brain and brawn” idealized in Western militaries (Duncanson 2013) and exhibiting a “virulent masculinity” (Chatterjee 2016, 2). Performance of heroic brawn is insufficient, however; fighters for Daesh must act with correct intentions and the correct belief (Wood 2015). The piety of the warrior-monk is felt and experienced by upholding religious obligations rather than an outcome of intellectual endeavor. *Dabiq* stated: “They [the *mujaheddin*] do not complicate their knowledge by philosophizing their religion and thus abstaining from obligations through complex analysis. Rather their knowledge flows from their hearts” (issue 5, p. 27). While the motives of individual fighters are contested (Wood 2015), and we can easily question whether they seek martyrdom or material reward, the myth of the

warrior-monk remains potent for Daesh, as the figure unites (together with the Muslimwoman) its claims for control, authority, and legitimacy.

The warrior-monk reveals how the glorification of war promotes the belief that men are “natural protectors,” that they deserve special praise for their actions, that hierarchies are the natural order of society, that physical force is valued as a dispute resolution mechanism, and that having enemies is a normal condition (Enloe 2016; Highgate and Henry 2011). The warrior-monk figure unites the two spaces of Daesh—the battlefield and the home. This is similar to Elshtain’s discussions on the “beautiful soul” and the “just warrior” (1987). The warrior-monk protects purdah, and he is rewarded for his action in the battlefield “as man”—by being offered women slaves as payments, and given priority by Daesh in the marriage market over other men. Slaves are considered legitimate reward for fighting jihad because conquered populations, their wealth, and property become “bounty” for the warriors. Official UN sources found that Islamic State held nearly 3,500 slaves (UNHRC/UNAMI 2016). Umm Abbas confirms the success of this strategy: “The *Jazrawis* [fighters from the Gulf] here are the ones who have the most *sabiyas* [slaves]. They love their women. . . . He purchased one for 1000\$ [*sic*] loooool . . . then another for 10000\$” (Twitter, September 23, 2015). An article in *Dabiq* justified slavery of non-Muslims as punishment for “abandoning God’s favor.” Moreover, taking concubines is necessary because of “men’s instincts,” which have been suppressed in Western society because women there no longer hold purdah. It further argues that sexual sins are “the consequences of abandoning jihad and chasing after the *dunyā* [temporal worldly pleasures]” (*Dabiq*, issue 4, p. 17). As with marriage, Daesh has produced a set of guidelines regarding the proper treatment of slaves, including prohibiting a father and

son from raping the same slave. That it has created such documents confirms to many the abhorrent and cruel treatment of slaves by the group. The commodification of women is not limited to slavery; women are used as financial mules, for transactional sex, and kidnapping for ransom, and are strategically used to negotiate borders and checkpoints and in prisoner exchanges (Nasar 2013; Alhayek 2015; Hojati 2016). The twin economies of war and heteronormativity are overtly and unashamedly linked by Daesh to uphold the centers of power around which its authority coalesces. Highlighting the role of slaves alongside the warrior-monk and the Muslimwoman shows the apparent viscosity of Daesh—a certain fluidity of ontology of “human” beyond a male-female binary, and the strong connections between the spheres of life—and so confirms their proto-state condition.

The warrior-monk doesn’t only combine the battlefield and purdah within the territories of Islamic State in the present tense, but also creates a new mythological future. Daesh is working toward an “end of days” battle against the forces of unbelievers that will bring about the recreation of “God’s earth” through violence on a cosmic scale. Daesh’s account of history is one of perpetual conflict, in which the forces of evil have continuously sought to undermine and destroy the world of Islam. It anticipates violence on a global, transhistorical, and cosmic scale, which leads it to justify retaliation against perceived humiliations, injustices, and aggressions through highly organized and spectacular violence filled with symbolic messages. According to its key treatise, *The Management of Savagery* (Naji 2006), the violence of civil war is to be coaxed or disciplined into a future legal order by Daesh. It argues such savagery is natural after centuries of humiliation and is innate to the warrior-monk. A video it produced featuring

“Jihadi John” (Mohammed Emwazi) and others carrying out a mass execution, declares: “Know that we have armies in Iraq and an army in Sham [Syria] of hungry lions whose drink is blood and [whose] play is carnage.” Unlike other militaries, who obfuscate their extreme violence, Daesh celebrates and extends it because it confirms the totalizing and apocalyptic aesthetic of its violence.

While individual acts of violence are barbaric, the savagery is not random; it is justified and framed in a narrative of religious war, and it serves a strategic purpose of disrupting existing local tribal loyalties, lineages, and power/authority. The cult of the warrior-monk transforms local patriarchal relations, because leadership is no longer based on genealogy, nobility or even *hazz* (good fortune) but upon piety, loyalty to the new organization, and military prowess. Daesh insists that fighting men of local tribes and cities declare allegiance through the *bayaa* (the laying of hands and declaration of fealty) that binds individuals not only to Islamic State but to the leader upon whom they lay their hands. Such allegiances provide Daesh with additional fighters, financial aid, and weapons (Gambher 2014), while simultaneously usurping the authority of traditional leaders (derived through age, kinship, and patronage) by empowering young men because of their ability to fight and their new loyalty. Combined with slavery and the transnational Muslimwoman archetype, Daesh is eliminating local ways of life by rewriting relations of patriarchy and modes of masculinity and femininity. The warrior-monk is valued for his overt signs of piety and physicality—there is a clear objectification of the male body. In the Twitter avatars of male Daesh members, in its media output, and in magazines, it promotes ideals of vitality, fitness, and strength. In its propaganda, protein shakes, free weights, and AK47s and other rifles feature prominently

in images of men in the home or in the street as well as the battlefield, and tracksuits or camouflage uniforms are essential to the “*jihadi* look.” Maffesoli argues that aesthetics has the power of creating effective social affinities and sympathies experienced by individuals in relation to others (1991, 12–13). The sense of brotherhood or homosociability is central to Daesh, a core component of cohesion recognized in the study of military effectiveness (King 2013). The featured stories of martyrs in editions of *Dabiq* are always stories of great friends and participation in a great adventure under God’s protection, in their mission sometimes achieving death. The accompanying pictures show the men looking happy, confident, proud—and in death, smiling with a halo about them. This “uniform” of jihad takes control of the meaning and social practice of death away from local institutions and practices, and toward a more homogeneous experience of grief and mourning. This is combined with the enforcement rules of mourning for widows and family regardless of local custom. Reshaping the institutions of death, as well as life, is highly significant in a conflict and war zone.

This combination of controlling the institutions of life and death in a religio-militarized proto-nationalism is part of a total-war mentality. Ottoway (2015) claims that Daesh is state-building to fund the war, and argues that without territorial rule the top-down military structure would crumble. However, this conceptualization fails to account for the symbiotic nature of Daesh’s ideology of the caliphate and the Apocalypse. Imposing a hierarchy of priorities between controlling violence and life, forces us, unsatisfactorily, to view Daesh as either a state or not. Instead, the idea of the proto-state as existing in a nucleic condition of flux enables us to reconcile tensions without resorting to binaries. Daesh’s focus on war provides the basis for protecting and

organizing the good life of submission, but also brings the chaos of conflict into the ordered imaginary of submissive-civilian living. The warrior-monk cannot exist only in the battlefield. The distinction between the “killing fields” and “home” cannot be sustained despite purdah—rather, there is a continuum. Brickell (2008) discusses where cultures of conflict are infused into the core constituents of a society, and shows how the violence of conflict at the state level of war continues to influence micro-level behavior postconflict. For Daesh, as a proto-state, this isn’t only a legacy of conflict, but a parallel effect, and a parallel geography. The warlike violence is brought home from the war front through the public and staged execution of tribes who resist Daesh, and the systematic sectarian-based violence in nominal civilian spaces—such as destroying shrines, Shiite mosques, and ancient monuments. Thus in proto-states the distinction between civilian and military and ideas of territory fluctuate, but their gendered ideal types as mechanisms of control remain stable.

Mechanism 3: Street Violence

The two figures of the Muslimwoman and warrior-monk operate in gender-segregated but codependent imagined spaces (the latter in the “battlefield,” the former in the “home”), but they are brought together through Daesh’s public demonstrations of organized, gendered violence in a third space: the street. This third mechanism redefines access, acceptable conduct, and governance of the so-called caliphate across the public and private spheres. Utilizing a gender-informed analytical framework shows that the proto-state is more than a nascent or “prestate” condition, but rather is constantly rewriting spatial understandings. The violence of the street blurs the boundaries between the warrior-monk and the Muslimwoman and between the civilian and military actions of

Daesh. This violence shows how proto-states become inscribed and embodied through coercion. In the archetypes of Daesh the submission of the warrior-monk and the Muslimwoman is consensual and agentic, but behind every promise of paradise is a threat of punishment. Its acts of coercion operate at two levels: first, in the creation of boundaries and borders that shape and contain the *umma*, and, second, in creating the boundaries and borders that define the caliphate.

According to Islamic State, existing international treaties do not determine the borders of the caliphate. A popular video demonstrates this when in a dramatic climax a fighter speaks of breaking the “barrier of Sykes Picot”⁴ as he purportedly crosses it, claiming it no longer prevents Muslims from living together as the *umma*. Esposito (2015) argues that Daesh’s commitment to eliminating state borders seeks to evoke the glories of Islamic history in the face of centuries of Western invasions, occupation, and colonialism. Within its expansionist global political vision though, Daesh still requires control of the local, and recognition of the importance of territory (Hamdan 2016). In July 2014, Daesh announced the issuance of “caliphate passports” to approximately eleven thousand citizens in a conscious effort to create a new permanent Islamic State identity. Doing so, Daesh paradoxically presents itself as sustaining harmonious “safe spaces” (for “rightly believing” Muslims), a zone of peace (*dar-al-Islam*) that is contrasted with a zone of war (*dar-al-Harb*). Despite aerial bombardment from opponents, *Muhajiraat* claim that living under Islamic State is safer than in *dar-al-Kufr* (“land of the unbeliever”). Bint Mujahid, a *muhajirat*, presented an environment of protection and safety: “Now I was home from Taraweeh in complete safety, comfort and honor. Surrounded by *mujahidin* [male fighters] knowing none can harm me. What a

difference” (Twitter, July 17, 2015). The warrior-monk maintains his status through a less than subtle “protection racket” (Sjoberg and Peet 2011). This sets up a binary logic between anarchy-evil outside its borders and governance and peace within it. This logic of sovereignty has been criticized by Cynthia Weber (1994), who shows how the performance of statecraft based on the assumption of a disordered anarchical international system leads to a gendered order within the domestic borders of the state. For Daesh’s worldview and *raison d’être* to be sustained, it cannot tolerate desertion. Violence is central to maintaining jurisdiction; that is, the ability to define its borders even as they override older state borders. Daesh violently polices its borders, through identity cards, passports, import and export duties, and the introduction of a visa-type system for movement within Daesh. This contrasts with its earlier days, when members of Islamic State reported fluid movement and the ability to travel back and forth to Europe and elsewhere. To reinforce the shift, it became a crime to assist anyone trying to leave the caliphate without permission, and a violation of sharia to seek to leave. To deter others, an Austrian teenager was reportedly beaten to death with a hammer, after she repeatedly tried to leave Raqqa in November 2015 (Sommers 2015). In another case, a son publically executed his mother after she tried to persuade him to leave (Hall 2016).

Violence governs the borders within Islamic State too. In 2003–2009 Iraq’s state infrastructure was the target of Islamic State’s violence. Most casualties were Shi’a because they dominated state institutions. Post-2012 the ratio shifted and Daesh focused more on targets from everyday life (Economics and Peace 2015). In 2016, six thousand people were killed as a result of Daesh nonmilitary violence (Economics and Peace 2016). The scale is not to be dismissed and is well documented in United Nation reports

(2015, 2016); Daesh is responsible for thousands of men being buried in mass graves, enslaving thousands of women, and the degrading treatment of prisoners (Spence 2014). The violence by Daesh against those they define as “Other” also defines the actions and activities of the collective *umma* for the proto-state; transgressions of behavior or belief cast an individual outside of the ordered submission of sharia and the caliphate. The display of mutilated bodies, public slave auctions, and summary executions by crucifixion or beheading for alleged traitors, witches, homosexuals, and rapists are not incidental or ad hoc (Zech and Kelly 2015). The torture of individuals and the manner of their death is highly symbolized and is designed to refer to historic examples, thereby reinforcing Daesh’s foundation myth, and meant to dehumanize those who are suffering. It treats enemies and prisoners as animals—ritually slaughtering them as if they were meat, or keeping them in cages (Cheterian 2015). The so-called rightness of its violence is premised upon a narrow and unorthodox reading of sharia and from a romanticized vision of an Islamic “golden age.” Daesh derive its legal legitimacy not from the fact that it is culturally conservative or traditional, but paradoxically because it is “new” and believes itself to be “re-establishing” a much older, sacred tradition that overturns local custom (*ibadaa*, or unwarranted innovation). The many instances of beheading, stoning, and amputation are explained to the public as examples of justice from the time of the Prophet and those who immediately followed him.⁵ This torture is made meaningful as a deterrent and punishment because there is a continuum of violence—before, during, and after conflict, and from personal and household to the international (Enloe 2016). Violence is inflicted upon those, and creates those, who are deemed “ungovernable” because they cannot be brought into the *umma*. We should therefore see the violence

carried out against thieves or traitors as operating alongside that against women who fail to wear the correct *niqab* and gloves. At least fifteen women have been disfigured with acid for this “crime,” and another woman reportedly had an animal trap used on her breast (and died of her injuries) as a result of breast-feeding in public (Smith 2015). Tellingly, it was the Al-Khansaa police brigade of women who carried out these public and symbolic punishments for violations of purdah—for not upholding the Muslimwoman ideal-type, and for violating the “natural” order of the street. The rules of dress and conduct in the public sphere, in the street, become important because they demonstrate the new juridical structures, and quash vestiges of the old tainted political and cultural power. Through this violence, only a particular class of pious male is cast as political in the public sphere.

Conclusion

This chapter has introduced the concept of the “proto-state” to develop our understanding of so-called Islamic State, and demonstrates that a gendered perspective helps us explain underlying paradoxes of its existence. The chapter shows that Daesh exhibits classic characteristics of a proto-state, trapped in a perpetual state of instability, flux, and fluidity, and yet coalesces and finds form as it challenges and forcibly remakes authority. Daesh manages to cohere around three core control mechanisms: the Muslimwoman archetype, the warrior-monk archetype, and “violence of the street.” These mechanisms reveal that the viscosity of Islamic State is possible because of the imposition of an overarching gender hierarchy that places a particular class of man, the warrior-monk, at the pinnacle, and the nonbelieving female slave at the bottom. The purpose of this gender hierarchy is not only to create “God’s order on Earth” but also to transcend race-based

ideas of nationalism and territorially limited ideas of statehood. The hierarchy is manufactured through a war economy, a militarized culture and society, and the policing and coercion of territory and of the identities permitted within it. These are made meaningful to the people living under Daesh's control by redefining womanhood via a transnational ideal that also governs private relations; through the preferential treatment of jihadi soldiers; and through the symbolic, sexualized, and systematic violence used to coerce. This helps us understand why Daesh simultaneously denies and depends on local territorial formations of itself. The analysis reveals that the process of statehood is never complete; Daesh exists in a state of flux and consequently seeks extreme control. Daesh is caught in a constant and never-ending assertion of control—in the home, the battlefield, and the street—against both local and global competitors. This self-assertion reveals that Islamic State is not simply a nascent or weak state, or a terrorist or guerrilla movement, but a proto-state. Moreover, this insight into Daesh as a proto-state helps challenge the exceptionalist narrative concerning Daesh, and through a gendered analysis, its paradoxical mechanisms, discourse, and practices are demystified.

Notes

¹ I hope readers will forgive the pun on “Schrödinger’s cat.” Schrödinger carried out a thought experiment to help us understand quantum physics and the flaws of the Copenhagen interpretation of quantum mechanics and Heisenberg’s uncertainty principle regarding knowledge and observation. The cat, trapped in a box, is to be thought of as both dead and alive because we cannot be sure of its death until it is observed. For more information:

<http://www.informationphilosopher.com/solutions/experiments/schrodingerscat/>.

² *Sharia* is often misunderstood as a codified legal system but should be understood as jurisprudence. *Sharia* is not a singular body of relations, but a history of judgments on public, private, and political life that current authorities may draw upon in their formulations.

³ *Muhajirat* (pl. *muhajiraat*) means female migrants. Islamic State uses it to describe women who have traveled to join Daesh, in contrast with women already residing in territory it controls. The term implies a holy pilgrimage, *hajj*. Another term is *mujahidat*, meaning female fighter; the Arabic root for the word is *jihad*. The male equivalent is *mujahidin*.

⁴ This is a reference to the Sykes-Picot agreement signed in 1916 between Great Britain and France. Popular understanding is that it created state boundaries of the Middle East, many of which are seen unrelated to ethnic or sectarian affiliations (Pursely 2015).

⁵ It is worth noting that these interpretations are disputed. Stoning does not exist as a punishment in the Qur'an or Sunna. The verse used by Daesh to justify beheadings ("smite their necks") needs to be read in conjunction with the next verse, which demands, "When ye have thoroughly subdued them, bind captives firmly. Thereafter is the time for either generosity or ransom" (chapter 47, verse 4). Beheading, clearly, is not intended. And removing a thief's hand is justified only if the state has guaranteed food for all, which is not so in Daesh.