

The Caliphate State: Advancing Towards the Past, ISIL and the Local Community in Iraq

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Book Title:	The Caliphate State: Advancing Towards the Past, ISIL and the Local Community in Iraq
Author:	Faleh Abdel Jabbar
Date of publication:	2017
Publisher:	Arab Center for Research and Policy Studies
No. of pages:	463

Faleh Abdel Jabbar passed away suddenly on 26 February 2018 at the height of his intellectual development, clearly visible in his last book *The Caliphate State*. Abdel Jabbar, born in Baghdad in 1946, became politically aware at an early age. His thought passed through various phases in light of his critical reading of his practical experiences; he moved from the Ba’ath Party to the Communist Party, then joined a Democratic Front for the Liberation of Palestine camp near Amman in 1970 during the conflict between the PLO and the Jordanian authorities. Abdel Jabbar sought refuge in Prague and subsequently moved to Beirut until he joined the Kurdish armed movement in Iraqi Kurdistan with all of the “risk” involved in that choice with respect to the national conscience. He then returned to Beirut when the Kurdish front was expelled following the 1975 Algiers Agreement between Iraq and Iran. Thereafter he continued to move between politics, science, and academic ambition.

In Beirut, he took up the role of Marxist-leftist researcher and translator, throwing himself into producing his magnum opus in translation, *Capital* by Karl Marx in six volumes. In the 1990s, he settled in London where he earned a doctoral degree in sociology and subsequently rejoined the Arab communist press in the magazine *Al-Nahj*, where he wrote diligently even after the collapse of the Soviet Union. He lived a life rich in political and personal experiences, consistently swept away by the intellectual world, and did not shy away from

critiquing his own experiences or responding to the need to update or rethink them.

This review presents a reading of the book *The Caliphate State* which, firstly, revisits Abdel Jabbar’s previous works, some of which are considered an intellectual and methodological introduction to his latest book and others of which represent turning points in his intellectual history, such that we may become acquainted with his intellectual biography. It then explores the book’s structure, stopping briefly at the methodology he employed in dealing with the topic of the Islamic State [*ISIS*] and what sets him apart from other scholars who have previously taken up the issue. We then examine the historical and local realities he attempted to probe. We deal in particular with his examination of the Islamic State’s experience dominating people and their surroundings through its violent administration – which Abdel Jabbar termed “a rentier penal colony” – thereby casting light on the brutal authority exercised by *ISIS* in the areas it was able to occupy.

In his analyses, Abdel Jabbar made use of the methods of social and political science, taking a macro view of society by examining its intellectual bases, its capacities and the welcoming environments it presented, as well as using empirical and statistical research methods. He was liberated from mechanical understandings of the relationship between the social, the intellectual, and the imagined. He conducted direct interviews with samples of the people he was writing about, then read those data using analytical

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and descriptive approaches, tracing them back to their historical contexts and employing the techniques of textual analysis. In his diagnosis of ISIS, he relied on social, political, and historical approaches. He examined it through its effective history, its relationship with the modern history of Iraq and its surroundings, and the historical experience of building an absolutist state (the “anti-state”, *dawlat al-lādawla*), then attempted to make “analytical connections between the structural factors and

ideological, intellectual factors which contributed in the appearance of ISIS.”⁽²⁾ He attempted to refute the putative, incorrect relationship between the rise of ISIS and its hypothetical social base in Sunni regions. He offered a thorough description of the daily life of people under the control of ISIS, especially those in Mosul which ISIS forcefully captured in 2014. We have divided the themes of the book into major themes which help us to penetrate its ideas and subjects.

I: Between Devotion to Past Ideology and Keeping Up with the Questions of the Present

Despite the shocks to the global left produced by the collapse of the Soviet Union, Abdel Jabbar never stopped working on the Marxist conception of the world, remaining attached to it until his dying breath. He introduced various innovations by which he attempted to release Marxism from the cage of ideology into the field of politico-historical society and make it more open to a range of ideas taken from academic research, even if this did not seem to be without difficulty. He would return, from time to time, to the works of Marx and his students, publishing a number of critical reviews of Marxism while retaining a radical Marxist edge. His book *After Marx* (2010) may be considered an example of the way Abdel Jabbar understood Marx, or what is left of him, but Abdel Jabbar failed to ask the decisive, necessary question: what remains of Marx and Marxism after the collapse of the Soviet Union (i.e. after the end of Marxism’s real historical experience). Instead he asked a general and somewhat outdated question: “what comes after Marx?” He thus did not begin from the principle of moving beyond Marxism, but emphasized the necessity of “renewing” it while accepting its basic theories (the labor theory of value, surplus value).

When Abdel Jabbar speaks about Marx’s contribution to state theory, he considers it sufficient to say that Marx’s theory in this respect is incomplete and needs to be supplemented and renovated. The fact of the matter is that Marx did not expound heavily on theory of the state; he simplified it considerably,

having connected it to class struggle and, on a deeper level, to property: for him the state’s existence was tied to that of property and a property-owning class. Because he was essentially seeking to undermine the two simultaneously—property and classes—the state is no more to Marx than an oppressive, classist entity which is to be eliminated during the transition to socialism. As such, Marx did not give the civilizational or organizational facets of the state very much attention in his analysis, nor did he grant the possibility of effecting a serious transformation in the roles it carries out on behalf of the social whole by way of a democratic framework of governance. As the experience of socialism in the twentieth century proved, the Soviet system’s confiscation of property and elimination of class did not lead to the “withering away” of the state in favor of autonomous social management of production and distribution. Instead, it led to accumulation of property by a tyrannical state which, through its totalitarianism, took over economy, society, and culture. But this did not change Abdel Jabbar’s perspective: “in the final analysis, the working class must take over and destroy this instrument [i.e. the state], and replace it with a new political instrument allowing the foundation to be laid for the disappearance or gradual withering-away of the new organizer (the proletariat) and its new organizational instrument (the socialist state).”⁽³⁾ It may be the case that Abdel Jabbar still relied on the possibility of the state’s decline, such that, through such a decline, socialism may spring forth.

2 Khalil Anani, “Dawlat al-Khilāfa: Tafkīk al-Bunya al-Īdiyōlōjīyya wa’r-Ramziyya wa’s-Siyāsiyya li-Dā’ish”, *Omran* (119, Spring 2018).

3 Faleh Abdel Jabbar, *Mā Ba’da Mārks* (Beirut: Dar Farabi, 2010).

Marx approaches the state from a single angle, attempting to establish how to destroy it in the social revolution. He busied himself with production, property and class struggle at the expense of his study of the state. Commenting on this, Abdel Jabbar forgives Marx's failure to produce a state theory, saying that "Marx gave priority in his detailed work to analyzing the mode of production in remarkable depth and with studied, complex, precise investigation."⁽⁴⁾ Marx was interested in the class base and in determining its classist, oppressive, and organizational functions aimed at prolonging the supremacy of the ruling class and the ideas that support its dominance.

Abdel Jabbar demonstrates his admiration for Marx's definitions of the state: first, it is "an instrument for class domination and class oppression," while "Marx is the arch nemesis of the state and the preacher of its demise"; second, it is "a free-standing power which dominates society"; and thirdly, he emphasizes its historicity. As for Friedrich Engels' book *The Origin of the Family, Private Property, and the State*, Abdel Jabbar believes that Engels "encountered a major difficulty in directly linking the emergence of the state, as a separate, general power over the masses [...] with the vehemence of class struggles." Despite this, Abdel Jabbar argues that "this book contains an application of an important practical dimension of the deep Marxist approach."⁽⁵⁾

He offers a bolder but nonetheless cautious critique of Lenin's work *The State and Revolution*, stating that "one might venture to say that Lenin's book reduces Marx's understanding of the state to a single domain (the state as an instrument of domination)." He then shifts the priority back to Marx, saying that "Lenin erases the structural and institutional distinction which Marx set forth between a state with a majority of workers and firmly-rooted democratic institutions (i.e. Britain) and a state without these specific conditions, just as he erases the possible duality of historical development: that of peaceful, gradual development, and that of sudden, revolutionary

development."⁽⁶⁾ This critique may have been Abdel Jabbar's way in to a reformed Marxism that would be more open to democratic aspirations.

Abdel Jabbar strengthens this critique with his opposition to the thesis stating that Marxist theory "is composed of three parts: historical materialism, dialectical materialism, and scientific socialism." He responds that this distinction is arbitrary and false, "derived from Lenin's article 'The Three Sources of Marxism'", and that "the transformation of this statement into a school of thought was one of the things that undermined Marxism," going on to say that "Marxist theory is the theory of analyzing and critiquing the capitalist system, and the theory of searching for historical possibilities to critique and overcome capitalism."⁽⁷⁾ These revisions to the possible content of Marxism place Abdel Jabbar among the ranks of the reformers. He then re-emphasizes his association with Marxism by stressing the social bases of Marx's theory, mentioning that "Marx considered the relation between labor and capital the structural essence within whose framework all social relations must be understood,"⁽⁸⁾ as well as stressing the seriousness of Marx's science and its currency by drawing attention back to his economic theory, with the labor theory of value and the theory of surplus value, saying "what's essential [...] is that the capitalist mode of production, based on the principle of profit (i.e. deriving surplus value – first the absolute, then the relative), is not capable of survival without expansion (i.e. extensive reproduction, which requires expansion into the domestic and world markets) which is achieved in the first few centuries through international trade mediated by the state and, in the age of globalization, outside the bounds of this mediation."⁽⁹⁾ As such, he reaches the decisive theoretical conclusion that it is necessary to affirm the vitality and survival of Marxism as well as our need for it: "[the supposed death of] Marxism will prove its falseness during the first wide-ranging crisis to come."⁽¹⁰⁾ He thereby secured his seat among the

4 Ibid, pp. 12, 134.

5 Ibid, p. 38.

6 Ibid, p. 47.

7 Ibid, pp. 58 - 59.

8 Ibid, p. 72.

9 Ibid, pp. 75 - 76.

10 Ibid, p. 81.

reformers of Marxism, but in academic practice, he actually left this seat empty; most of his serious applied research lacked Marxist class methodology.

II: Research which paved the way for The Caliphate State

Between the mid-1980s and his death in 2018 Abdel Jabbar published many academic and sociological studies including *Materialism and Contemporary Religious Thought* (1985), *Signs of Rationalism and Superstition in Arab Political Thought* (1992), *The State and Civil Society in Iraq* (1995), *Impossible and Possible Democracy* (1998), and *Democracy: A Historical-Sociological Comparison* (2006).

In 2007, he published his study *In Situations and Horrors: About the Social and Cultural Sources of Violence* in which he examined the overlap between methodology, religious culture, and positivist thought within an Arab framework.⁽¹¹⁾ In it, he argued that while violence is tied up in history more broadly, it also has its own history, its own modes and forms spread across history. Abdel Jabbar states that “every time we attempt to delve deep into the question of violence, we end up at either instinct or society. Many sociologists and biologists have consistently concluded that there is a paucity of evidence suggesting that violence is a “natural” reaction and that hostility is an “instinctual deviation.”⁽¹²⁾ He concludes that “whiteness [violence] cannot exist in isolation from white things. A transition must take place from the semantic load (whiteness) to the load-bearing structure, to a sociocultural framework in the course of its transformations and tensions. Religions and schools of thought, nationalisms and ethnicisms, classes and communities, values and ideologies are the warp and weft of this framework, which is in a state of growth, differentiation, division, multiplication, and confrontation.⁽¹³⁾ He continues by saying “that this division, multiplication, transformation, and differences produce violent outcomes in various conditions [...] and the sources of difference (i.e. the sources of violence) penetrate [...] these levels: [...]

differences in language, religion, doctrine, gender, value system, standard of living, color (race), or profession.⁽¹⁴⁾ The basic point within the issue of violence “remains a problem “not of difference, but of the way that difference is seen and interpreted, and in its social carrier with its values and its way of thinking.”⁽¹⁵⁾

Abdel Jabbar produced studies relating to the sociology of religion and religiosity which also served as important precursors to his methodology in *The Caliphate State*. He was passionate about the sociology of militant religious groups in Iraq, something we observe in much of his research such as his *The Turban and the Effendi* (2012) and *The State: The New Leviathan* (2017), which were a sort of preface and bridge to *The Caliphate State*. In *The New Leviathan*, he studied the path leading to the construction of an authoritarian Iraqi state completed in the time of Saddam Hussein. In *The Turban and the Effendi*, he studied the transformation of the Shi‘i scene in Iraq, in its personalities, institutions, families, categories, and its economy of religious life; to him, it was an attempt to understand the relationship between the holy and the worldly in the origins of the religious protest movement in Iraq⁽¹⁶⁾ while making covert comparisons, usually with Iran, based on the theoretical tools of the sociology of religion and academic research methods.

In *The Turban and the Effendi*, Abdel Jabbar studied the roots of self-consciousness among Iraq’s Shi‘a from the 1930s, drawing an analytical line to the Shi‘i movement and using the term “religiosity” [*at-tadayyun*] in the same way as Max Weber and Azmi Bishara in place of “religious” [*ad-dīnī*] and “religion” [*ad-dīn*]. He conducted an analysis of

11 Shawki Abdelamir, “Fāliḥ ‘Abd al-Jabbār: al-Muqātil ‘Alā Jabhat al-Ḥayāh”, *al-Fayṣal*, 01/05/2018 (accessed on 14/05/2019 at <http://bit.ly/2Vj2biQ>)

12 Faleh Abdel Jabbar, *Fī'l-Aḥwal wa'l-Aḥwal: ‘An al-Manābi’ al-Ijtīmā’iyya wa’th-Thaqāfiyya li’l-‘Unf*, 2nd ed (Beirut: Al Furat, 2008), p 14.

13 Ibid, p. 15.

14 Ibid.

15 Ibid, pp 15 - 16.

16 Sami Zubeida, “Muqaddima”, in Faleh Abdel Jabbar: *al-‘Imāma wa’l-Afandī: Sōsiyōlōjīyā Khīṭāb wa-Ḥarakat al-Iḥtijāj ad-Dīnī*, trans. Amjad Hussein (Beirut/Baghdad: Al Jamal, 2010), p. 8.

the transformations of Shi'i movements following the 1958 coup d'état, noting how the Shi'i political movement was influenced by the rapid growth of urban Shi'i communities and by juristic controversy, which produced new parties such as the Da'wa Party (*Hizb ad-Da'wa*) and the Sadrist Movement (*at-Tayyār aṣ-Ṣadrī*).⁽¹⁷⁾ According to Abdel Jabbar political Shi'ism is part of the general rise of political Islam in the Middle East while also being a local response to sectarian discrimination, in the sense that it is a mix of the two—the sectarian and the fundamentalist.⁽¹⁸⁾

III: The Caliphate State: Advancing Towards the Past

Abdel Jabbar's *The Caliphate State: Advancing Towards the Past* contains an introduction, ten chapters, a concluding chapter, and an appendix. The introduction focuses on a study of local Sunni society's conception of itself and its other, its partner in the nation. He asks critically whether it is possible to believe the widespread conception of a society that in its worldview and way of imagining itself has supposedly served as an incubator for ISIS and other similar organizations, inasmuch as it has become a producer of such groups and formed a social base so well-suited to the creation of ISIS – through which it gave expression to itself.

Abdel Jabbar firmly rules out and condemns this account, instead attributing the problem in large part to the failure of political elites to build a state based on citizenship (*dawlat muwāṭana*) which protects all and grants equal rights to all. This serves as his explanatory framework for the rise of the takfiri movement, its ideology and symbols, and its reasons for transitioning to the idea of “the Caliphate now [*dawlat al-khilāfa al-ān*]” (p. 28). With this analysis of the failed Iraqi state, local Iraqi society in its representations of itself and of the world, and the interaction of the failure of political and national development, Abdel Jabbar draws out the changes that have taken place in the relationship between the state and the elites' political and social project on the one hand and society and social consciousness on the

Abdel Jabbar began this work with the hypothesis that Shi'i Islamist movements were excessively focused on the rare opportunity presented by Bush Senior's invasion to reform the political regime and ultimately Islamize government and take revenge for the sectarian oppression suffered by the Shi'a. In this introduction, he depicts the major motivators for Shi'i political movements in Iraq that to a great extent governed their praxis under the occupation and what came after.⁽¹⁹⁾

other, allowing him to produce a) an analysis of the mechanisms by which ISIS was able to sink its teeth into the social sphere and exploit a power vacuum, and b) a definition of the mechanisms by which it managed things and persons and its brutal modes of domination over both.

In the first chapter of the book, Abdel Jabbar discusses the authoritarian Iraqi state and the disorder it produced in its regulating relationships with the community, the nation, and various identities. By dismantling society's structures and violating its body and soul, he shows that the state assisted the growth of takfiri movements and made them more active and more dangerous, culminating in the declaration of the Caliphate. In the second and third chapters, the author focuses his analytical energy on “the Takfiri Movement and its ideology” and its transition into a Caliphate “state”. His analysis considers the idea of the “Islamic State [*ad-dawla al-islāmiyya*]”, the motives behind the revival of the caliphate concept, and the shift of the takfiri movement towards immediate implementation in the slogan “Caliphate Now [*al-khilāfa al-ān*]”. However, the current implementation of the notion of caliphate was not the product of this older idea, “but rather was the result of the trajectory of Iraqi Salafism itself, the result of Ba'th-era military-technocrat personnel embracing Jihadi Salafism *en masse* having found

17 Muhammad Othmani, “Al-‘Imāma wa’l-Afandī: Sōsiyōlōjiyā Kḥiṭāb wa-Ḥarakat al-Iḥtijāj ad-Dīmī”, *Iḍā‘āt*, 01/11/2018 (accessed on 14/04/2019 at <http://bit.ly/2Hj9Hqj>)

18 Ibid, p. 48.

19 Ibid, pp. 21 - 20.

therein a source of “deliverance from error” – but also, more importantly,

from disappearance and oblivion” (p. 55).

The fourth chapter studies symbols and their relationship to takfiri ideology and analyses the imaginary of local Sunni society and how it interacted with other elements both before and after the “Islamic State’s” takeover of the Sunni cities. The fifth chapter examines local society’s imaginary *vis-à-vis* ISIS, which he terms the “failed state”, the “anti-state” (*dawlat al-lā dawla*) (p. 29). From the sixth through to the tenth chapters, he turns to an inspection of the social field, investigating the concepts, behaviors, and mechanisms which ISIS has employed in breaking and dominating society. Based on field research, he then adds to these rich, dense chapters several appendices that dissect the state of local society under ISIS rule through the help of many assistant researchers. He concludes all of this with an in-depth study of the transformations in the local imaginary as part of the international “War on Terror” which has thrust itself into the conflict on the ground in Iraq, as well as the hopes and fears of local demographics.

The book focuses on refuting the theory which treats “the Sunni community as if it were the social incubator of the ISIS mentality” (28). Abdel Jabbar contends that these conceptions are incorrect in their diagnosis of local societies and depend on a piecemeal attitude to problems. He comes to the important conclusion that ISIS is not a reproduction of the local society, nor does it give expression to it or to its conceptualisation nor does it express its views; instead, the entire issue goes back to the failure of ruling elites to build a citizenship state which could bring all into the fold in spite of diversity. This failure laid the groundwork for the Caliphate ideology, its seeds already in existence in Arab Muslim societies, to take over the scene, emboldened by organization and arms. In summary, it is the deep crisis of Iraqi political society that laid the groundwork for the rise of ISIS. Abdel Jabbar says that ISIS “is not the product of local society’s acceptance but can be attributed to two basic frameworks: 1) the failure of the state to build a pluralist society or to effect practical-institutional acceptance of diversity, and 2) the existence of a social movement carrying

the ideology of the caliphate within Arab Muslim societies—including Iraq—since long ago. In fact, the takfiri movement’s transition from the moment of violence to the moment of the state/caliphate’s announcement was dependent on the Iraqi state’s failure to respond to local society’s protests against it” (p. 28). Before considering ISIS’s takfiri-despotic architecture, then Abdel Jabbar first discusses the factors which established a welcoming environment for the group’s ascendance. Thanks to the US occupation’s management of Iraq, “what happened after 2003 was the spread of the politicization of sectarian identities on a massive scale [... which] granted sub-state identities massive momentum that increased when [that politicization] became linked to elite conflict at the top over power and resources. This was the moment the occupying power launched into the process of constructing the new state it created without the input of all sections of society, based on a clear deficiency: the new dispensation was restricted to a solely Shi’i-Kurdish understanding.”⁽²⁰⁾

This produced a situation that made sectarian issues into a powder keg and fed jihadi Salafism, thereby, “breathing new life” into the body of ISIS which was developing at the heart of the “Islamic State of Iraq”. ISI, caught between the caution of Sunni society in the face of a sense of marginalization and constriction on one hand and its fear of the group on the other, rose and promptly fell, with Sunni society turning to the “Awakening” militias (*aṣ-Ṣahwa*) to rid itself of the practices of Abu Musab al-Zarqawi and his disciples, of the sectarian and terrorist option.

It was not long before the political situation in Iraq changed with Nouri al-Maliki’s rise to power, the occupying forces’ withdrawal, and al-Maliki’s attempts to renounce the “Awakening” and his rejection of their involvement in the security and military institutions. From 2012 – considered to be a year of transformation and withdrawal – onwards, the so-called “The Islamic State of Iraq” seized what it saw as an incredible opportunity to return to the Iraqi field: the failure of the sit-ins, then at their most intense, to force the government to respond to their demands. “The storm of rage grew ever more intense and the youth began to take a confrontational position. ISIS worked hard to benefit from local fury by attracting people to enlist in its ranks. It was not

long before its expansion was accompanied by a blatant sectarian propaganda campaign aimed against the Shi'a and in favor of elevating the status of Sunni

identity (pp. 153-4). But local society was searching for liberation, not for a liberator.

IV: The Failed State as a Pathway for ISIS

Abdel Jabbar has emphasized from the beginning that there is no popular incubator that ushered in the rise of ISIS and its fellow takfiri organizations; that what led to this was the failure of the state to build its legitimacy on the bases of peaceful, democratic representation and ruling elites' resistance to any form of change and use of raw violence; and that what is common to all cases is the tendency of the old state (Syria) or the new state (Iraq) to exercise an authoritarian monopoly and its inability – or refusal – to accept social identity pluralism or political pluralism (pp. 35-36). He argues that this is tantamount to saying “the state failed in building the nation” (p. 36). The occupation exacerbated the situation, and sub-national identities gained a powerful momentum which intensified when it became linked to the elite's conflict over power (p. 55). Al-Maliki's policies, resulting from his desire to monopolize authority, led to the unraveling of society, based on an interpretation of the notion of “majority” inverted from its political sense to a cultural, sectarian sense.

These policies opened up space for other non-rational and violent options to become prominent, purporting to be following the path toward change. At that point, ISIS came armed with the notion of the caliphate which appeared to one current within the contemporary Islamist movement to be “the symbol of an ancient, lost history and the utopia of building a glorious history to come. It is the past and the present in strong union. But the reason for the demand for a caliphate is [the desire] to restore the state, and restore the state is a fundamental precondition that must be met to restore Islam itself. Thus the inseparable link between the idea of the caliphate and the idea of the state and between the idea of the state and the demand for Islamization” (p. 55).

The dream of the return of the caliphate on the Sunni side, or the coming of the Mahdi on the Shi'i side, is an old concept, sometimes coming forth unexpectedly. The caliphate was not much discussed in the nineteenth century: even the Islamic Reformists

combined it with the contemporary trend towards constitutionalism. The issue gained prominence with the collapse of the Ottoman caliphate: we moved from the sacred caliphate to the principle of the secular masses. (p. 59) The Muslim Brotherhood and most other Islamist movements likewise attached themselves to the slogan of the Islamic state, not the caliphate, except for Taqi al-Din al-Nabhani (*Hizb at-Tahrir*) who remained attached to the caliphate and to the principle of the sovereignty of Shari'a. Even for al-Qaeda the caliphate was less of a priority than targeting the United States.

After the US occupation of Iraq, Iraqi Jihadi-Salafists began to favor taking over the state to build a new one on the ruins of the “Shi'a state” and directing jihad against the occupation. At the same time, foreign mujahids, led by al-Zarqawi, refused to establish central apparatuses and rejected the idea of the state, according to Abdel Jabbar; they were more inclined towards challenging the Shi'a. He states that “the idea of “state now” and “caliphate now” is an Iraqi creation, the brainchild of Iraqi technocratic circles—military, intelligence, civil [...] after 2003 [...] the announcement of ‘The Islamic State of Iraq’ in October 2006, then the declaration of the Caliphate in 2014, did not come out of a vacuum. It is a unique convergence of the Iraqi moment and the ideological heritage of the caliphate idea that developed over the course of the 20th century. Zarqawi's death may have removed the largest obstacle in the way of the Iraqi statist project” (p. 73). I do not agree with Abdel Jabbar on this matter: Zarqawi and his Arab disciples, as many witnesses attest, thought about and were invested in the state, and Abu 'Umar al-Baghdadi and Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi were full of praise for them for this reason.

After this, Abdel Jabbar shifts to probing ISIS' ideology and jurisprudence. He argues that what it has in common with Islamist movements is the goal of “Islamizing society”, moving individuals from communities whose Islam suffers from a range of defects (from ignorance to unbelief), toward the

true, correct Islam. He says that “the bond between the idea of Islamization and the concept of *jāhiliyya* provides plentiful space for diverse approaches towards a solution—from awareness and education to assassinations and terror, and ultimately even more violent acts performed in order to seize power, as soon as the term *jāhiliyya* comes to encompass the ruler” (p. 83). This is accompanied by an overlapping mixture of ideas of sovereignty [*al-ḥākimiyya*], Jahiliyya, takfir and jihad that brings together al-Mawdudi, Sayyid Qutb, Abd al-Salam Faraj, and Abu Bakr Naji, author of the book *Management of Savagery (Idārat at-Tawaḥḥush)*, which ultimately arrives at a view that deems the state a *kāfir* and society *jāhili* and finds the cure in holy warfare.

What makes ISIS distinct is the absence of the concept of Jahiliyya from its intellectual armory, where it is replaced by the concepts of “management of barbarity” (*tawaḥḥush*, Abu Bakr Naji) and “the jurisprudence of blood” (*fiqh ad-dimā*, Abdullah Al Muhajir) from two eponymous books that ISIS has adopted as a sort of constitution. *The Jurisprudence of Blood* “permits the killing of polytheists, the deliberate killing of those Muslims whose killing is not permissible, and self-killing (suicide operations)” (p. 85), based on the thesis that the world hangs between unbelief and the punishment for apostasy and has thus become a permissible theatre of war (*dār ḥarb*). *The*

Management of Savagery, meanwhile, describes a period that Abdel Jabbar calls “the most important stage through which the Umma will pass in the world of politics and military-civilian administration: laying out a global-local strategy for the struggle and explaining its constituent parts and how to implement it” (p. 87). Abdel Jabbar summarizes the two books as “a glorification of pure violence, elevating it to the level of ultimate virtue... whose ideological objects are Islamist-Nationalist hybrids in which xenophobia combines with religious chauvinism and sectarian hatred” (p. 91). “a system of ideas representing the world and the position of the group/the actor therein, but also incorporating a redemptive utopia whose basis is a dream: [...] expansion is to be accomplished in a world of foundational myths or narratives: a world which is a mixture of historical narratives dense with sacrality and material embodiments, but supported by symbols” (p. 92). These symbols include black banners, black turbans, black uniforms down to the ankle and slogans like “still here and expanding”, “the rattle of swords”, “Shari’a”, “Umma”, “Caliphate” – all of which refer to the glorious past (the Abbasids, the Qurashi bloodline, the careful use of names from the classical tradition) and the era of Prophets and Caliphs, attached to a messianic time (military displays indicating overwhelming force and exhibitionist public slaughter) (p. 92-99).

V: The Imaginary of the Sunni Community

Against the fragmentation of ISIS’s world – an alien, terrifying, legendary world – Abdel Jabbar analyses, deconstructs and examines the “imaginary of the Sunni community” on the eve of ISIS’ emergence and under its rule. He is able thereby to answer a question of great importance: Did this imaginary serve as the incubator for ISIS? Who produced and manufactured the organization? His answer is decisive: It was the failure of the political elite to build a state based on the ideals of citizenship that prepared the ground for ISIS’ difficult birth.

The first observation here is that this imaginary was a product of a crisis that began with the Gulf War, in which a humiliating defeat was inflicted on Saddam Hussein’s authoritarian regime and much of Iraq destroyed by American planes. Crisis followed

crisis and defeat followed defeat, and life for Iraqis was made more and more difficult by advancing despotism and the international embargo, culminating in the US invasion. Abdel Jabbar says “1991 may represent a logical starting-point for study. This was the year of military defeat in the war on Kuwait, which shook the foundations of the Iraqi state, and likewise the year in which armed rebellions broke out against the Ba’thist state” (pp. 111-112). From 1991 onwards there were many indicators that “the Sunni imaginary in major cities [...] began to move towards formation of a “Sunni identity”” (p. 112). And political enemies developed a prejudice towards areas in which Sunnis were a majority, which began to appear as “a breeding-ground of pure evil, the source of car bombs, extremists, and obstructions to any project for de-escalation and reconciliation

– and the homeland of ISIS, where the “State of the Caliphate” was founded” (p. 112).

Abdel Jabbar depicts the emergence and development of this imaginary in a historical context of crisis after formative years in which it was remarkably subservient; this transformation has been proceeding rapidly since 1991. Before 2003, its fears were not *of* the state but *for* it: it feared rebellion against the state. It might be possible to see this as “the first manifestation of a politicized confessional identity, albeit, at this point, still based on the state’s secular identity” (pp 115-116). But things became much more intense after the US occupation and the restructuring of the Iraqi entity along sectarian lines.

Until the occupation the Sunni community was observant and conservative, but it contained no more than “a few Salafist nuclei of limited effect [...] and the early spread of beard-wearing, of short robes, and of the use of miswaks” (pp. 119-120). The embargo, the Faith Campaign of the 1990s, destitution, the breakdown of the state – all these brought about changes, most prominently the collapse of Arab nationalist ideology and the sense of a state in danger (p. 21). In response, “a political-confessional identity was released. The Sunni political sphere began to feature slogans like “Iraq is Arab, o Safavids”, intended to directly brand Iraqi Shi’a as outsiders.” Abdel Jabbar adds that “this was the cradle of the later vengeful entente between Ba’thists and Takfiris, who came together to build a militant Sunni sectarian identity” (p. 129).

Abdel Jabbar traces this trajectory: from defence of the state of the community in 1991 to defence of the community of the state (i.e. the Sunni community), then to armed opposition in 2004-2006, then to the US-backed *Şahwāt* militias in 2006-2008, fragmentation under Maliki in 2011 - 2012 and finally popular mobilisation coinciding with the Arab Spring, which within the limited sphere provided by the Maliki government proved fruitless. This ended “with the fall of the major cities to the Caliphate in 2014 and the return of the Sunni community to their starting-point” (p. 134).

According to Abdel Jabbar the Maliki era was a turning-point which brought Sunni desperation to its apogee and created the groundwork for ISIS’ arrival on the scene as well as the defeat of the army with no fear of the enmity of the Sunni community. “Maliki made

the Da’wa Party ruler in the name of sectarianism; he made the elite rulers in the name of the Da’wa Party; and then he ruled along with his narrow circle (his son Ahmad and other close relatives) in the name of the elite.” This led to him violating “the four pillars of the nation-state: the principle of participation [...] as the foundation on which an ethnically and religiously heterogenous nation can be built [...] the principle of coalition government [...] the principle of solving disputes and combating rebellion [...] which require the participation of local communities” (p. 143). He excluded everyone, Kurdish, Sunni, and even Shi’i leaders, and instituted personal rule in the authoritarian apparatuses of the state after taking control of them. He then worked to dismantle all of the arrangements created to combat rebellion (dismissal of the Awakening Militias) and institute something tantamount to a military occupation in the Sunni governorates, with “arbitrary detentions and raids increasing daily [...] the detentions targeted many Awakening leaders” (p. 145) who had fought ISIS. When the Sunni-majority provinces presented their grievances peacefully in 2012, they received nothing from Maliki but violence and oppression, because his interest in “the notion of discussion was retreating in favour of a security solution” (p. 151). When Maliki crushed the peaceful protest movements that coincided with the Arab Spring, it produced a nihilistic form of protest attached to nothing in particular, which in 2015 became “characterised by a rejection of everything: rejection of ISIS, rejection of the (Shi’i) state, rejection of the (Shi’i) Popular Mobilisation Units, rejection of Sunni politicians at the centre, rejection of the clergy, and rejection of the political clergy” (p. 111).

In this desperate and intense situation, the Sunni community turned to an imaginary salvation, compensating for and providing an alternative to reality. But it did not occur to them that Jihadi-Salafist groups or ISIS would be their knight in shining armor. Abdel Jabbar says that “the idea of redemption came in the form of promises and predictions that spread in Mosul and some of the cities of Anbar that a popular revolution led by the Ba’th, tribal leaders, former military men and certain local notables would soon break out [...] and that the forces of the Islamic State would be one of its many battalions [...] that would have learnt the lessons of the past and its mistakes. [...] Local society did not aspire to ISIS

[...] if a popular revolution with no relation to Islam had taken place, it would have enjoyed widespread support” (p. 152). But the Islamic State seized the opportunity for a resurgence presented by the storm of popular anger, the youth turned towards violence and confrontation, and weapons began to appear at sit-ins. In this environment, “the Sunni community welcomed the defeat of the (Shi’i) government with open arms (2014). This welcome did not mean that they supported ISIS’ program or its plans. It meant that they took pleasure in seeing a despot fall – a pleasure expressed everywhere, even by enemies of the caliphate, but which was not long-lasting [...] the incident shows the extent of how pessimistic the Sunni imaginary had become about the prospect of any real improvement in Sunnis’ situation” (p. 133).

Abdel Jabbar’s premise is that “nation formation in states governing heterogenous societies – and Iraq is without a doubt such a society – depends on the political, economic and cultural space being open to the broadest possible participation. The absence of this open space is a serious misfortune, indeed, a major dilemma. It is not important whether unrest in a nation-state is the result of ethnic, religious/confessional, tribal, or regional divisions, some combination of or all of the above. The result is the same: the creation of the defective entity known as a “failed state”” (p. 50). In this case the state is unable to gain legitimacy or monopolise the means of violence with the consent of the people. Abdel Jabbar thus emphasises the structural connection between the failure of the nation-state and the rise of ISIS – an example which has repeated itself for all to see in Syria.

Within days of the fall of Mosul ISIS changed its tune, presenting its program for control and administration within the “City Document”. This document begins with the divine conquests, the liberation of families from the prisons of the “rejectionists” (i.e. the Shi’a), the efforts to revive the “glories of the Caliphate”, good treatment, the good life, and encouragement to collective prayer. But it quickly moves on to threats and prohibitions, exaggerated references to punishment, bans on intellectual pluralism and the abolition of positivist law.

ISIS worked to expel or kill Shi’a and members of the administration, made examples of followers of other religions by enslaving them or forcing them

to embrace Islam or denounce their religion. Bit by bit, the colours of life turned to black and white, showing the division of the world of the caliphate into punishment and advice: black for the fighters, white for the religious police (*Hisba*).

ISIS closed down courts and presented its own laws, setting up “Shari’a Courts”. Thousands of lawyers suddenly found themselves without work. The same was true for judges, many of whom ISIS found guilty of apostasy and executed, replacing them with their own members.

Prohibitions and harsh sentences... to avoid the forbidden under penalty of strict punishment. The religious police were the “eyes and ears of the state in daily life – the eagle-eyed identifiers of violations. They dispensed lashings as well as various kinds of death sentences [...] members of the religious police were distinguished by their white outfits and their boorish, conceited, cruel characters” (p. 179). Women were singled out for particularly harsh and detailed prohibitions: hijab, niqab, etc. And ISIS’ hatred of means of entertainment and communication and style was also given vent through the closure of shops dealing in these products” (p. 179).

Abdel Jabbar calls ISIS a “rentier caliphate” because it depended fundamentally on oil rents. Otherwise its economy was distinguished by three main features: taxes, loot, and a primitive irrational capitalism (following Max Weber). Abdel Jabbar’s surveys have allowed him to assemble an inventory of ISIS’ sources of income. Loot represented a significant part of its economy, including the confiscation of bank deposits, the seizure of Iraqi army weapons dumps, the trafficking of drugs and antiquities and looting of property. But most of its income came from outside sources (p. 202-205).

Abdel Jabbar attempts to present a dynamic picture of ISIS’ treatment of the various local groups to which it applied its golden rule of seizing “loot” and exerting coercion. This rule applied to businessmen who fled in the hope of saving their own skins without waiting to see what the bitter experience of life under ISIS would be like, as well as those who were forced to or chose to stay. As a result, most businessmen (contractors, builders and merchants) abandoned their companies in Salahuddin and Anbar; only a small group stayed behind in Mosul.

Corruption thus ran rampant, but work opportunities decreased. The religious police intervened more and more in prices, and major projects collapsed because of displacement and emigration (pp. 261-263).

ISIS' interest in the role and status of tribal leaders may have been a curse for the latter: the organisation made sure to order tribal leaders directly and in person to come and give their allegiance to the Caliph. Abdel Jabbar summarises the general atmosphere with a statement often made by locals: that there are very few local members of ISIS, no more than a few thousand of more than a million members, and they are from marginal families and lack morality (p. 265). A clash between the logic, values and identity of the tribe on the one hand, and ISIS on the other, was inevitable. Abdel Jabbar notes that the clash between the remains of the tribal networks and ISI had previously produced the Awakening Militias. The same thing happened with ISIS: tribal networks reflect the interests of local society and its culture – worldly political, economic, and social interests – and cultural values, which often stand in stark opposition to the Takfiri ideological system. Tribesmen live by custom, while takfiris live by an ultra-strict interpretation of Shari'a. There is a

large gulf between the two (pp. 285-286). Al-Qaeda and ISIS' "excessive strictness in matters of religion while ignoring custom was a source of conflict not only with the tribal milieu but with local clerics too" (pp. 287-288).

From the moment that ISIS became a despotic totalitarian power it was obliged to dedicate great efforts to indoctrinating people with its idea of Islam. Abdel Jabbar discusses this issue in the final chapter of the book: ISIS indoctrinated people and particularly young people with its idea of Islam while disciplining them by force and by administrative and military organization. "The Caliphate had an exaggerated obsession with bureaucratic administration, organised work and the preservation of forms reminiscent of the functioning of bureaucratic apparatuses under totalitarianism" (p. 335). Their religious classes presented the Prophet Muhammad as "the apostle sent out of mercy to the world with the name "the smiling and ferocious" (*aḍ-ḍaḥūk al-qattāl*), which is an accusation of sickness and not a title fit for a Prophet. They present God, "the most merciful", as a frowning deity who only smiles when he sees heads sent flying by the Muslims" (p. 348).

Conclusion

Abdel Jabbar rightly states that "the more closely we look at local Sunni society, the more tenuous the claim that it is a hibernator for ISIS appears [...] and we are drawn towards the state which has failed to build or rebuild the nation" (p. 369). He notes that the Caliphate was not declared under Abu Omar al-Baghdadi (2006-2010) but during the era of Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, after the collapse of the Syrian state and the *de facto* withdrawal of the Iraqi state from Sunni areas. This was a moment of crisis and the moment in which Takfiri forces rose triumphant, which Abdel Jabbar notes coincided with a growing idea in the communal imaginary that an existential threat faced the Sunni community following the creation of the Popular Mobilisation Units (pp. 372-373). Abdel Jabbar predicted the eclipse of the Caliphate state, since it contained the seeds of its own demise: "[the Caliphate state] has no future, and has made itself more than one Achilles heel. Firstly: the policy of the "pure" community which has punished the Sunnis [... which was] a re-application of a policy

that had failed in the days of the Awakening Militias [...] Secondly, it has made enemies of two ethnic and confessional groups, the Shi'a and the Kurds. [...] Finally, the rentier character of its financial resources" (pp. 379-380). He concludes that there is no way out of this predicament, this sustained crisis, other than adopting "a pan-sectarian middle way. Protest movements in Baghdad, the South and Sulaymaniyah show clearly what this path would look like" (p. 380). This advice rings true in all Arab countries which have torn up the principles of citizenship and adopted a policy of "divide and conquer".

The main criticism I have of this book is that it has an exaggerated idea of how widespread belief in the Caliphate is in Arab culture. In most cases the Caliphate has been no more than a dream, a sort of utopian fantasy, and has only become a political project on a very limited scale (led by Hizb ut-Tahrir). Most Islamist movements have located it in the realm of the post-strategic – the ultimate goal of their political plans. This applies for example to the

Muslim Brotherhood. Demand for this idea has only increased during major crisis in which the masses find themselves in historical stasis, when it becomes very difficult to advance by peaceful democratic means. The call for a Caliphate thus remained on the margins of events during the first half of the 20th century under the liberal post-independence states, and remained marginal throughout the ascendancy of Arab nationalism from the 1950s to the 1970s. It

only began to become popular with the defeat of June 1967, rising to prominence alongside ISIS thanks to a series of defeats and disasters: the wars that led to the occupation of Iraq and the failure of the state to protect its citizens and its territory.

In any case, Abdel Jabbar's study is a very important one. If nothing else, it has decisively refuted with solid evidence a much-repeated idea: that there is a solid social base for ISIS in Sunni Islam.

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