This book discusses ISIS within the context of violent non-state actors (VNSA); analyzes historical, ideological and operational roots and features of the group in Syria; and positions ISIS within the matrix of the conflicting parties in Syria. Although there are aspects of ISIS which do not fully overlap with the definitions of the VNSA, ISIS is still an organization that is on the border of holding qualities of a state in the Westphalian sense. ISIS is the pinnacle of the Salafi-jihadism and takfiri-messianism, and a living example of the Salafi-jihadi’s power of transformation according to changing dynamics on the ground. The group has been particularly skillful in benefiting from chaos by filling in the vacuum left by the failed states, Syria and Iraq. The group’s groundwork was laid down by Abu Musab Al-Zarqawi, who differed both practically and ideologically from Al-Qaeda. The differences between the Al-Zarqawi and Bin Laden schools morphed into active conflict in later periods; as ISIS consolidated its power and began dominating the Salafi-jihadi community.

This work demonstrates that ISIS is not a part of the Syrian insurgency against the Assad regime. Rather, it has maintained a separate agenda from the Syrian armed opposition, which has been trying to topple the Assad regime but stay within the existing system. ISIS, to the contrary, rejects the system both politically and territorially in its entirety, and aims to establish a caliphate which has no geographical constraints or limits.
The State of Savagery:
ISIS in Syria
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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS
AQI Al-Qaeda in Iraq
AQM Al-Qaeda in Mesopotamia
ASC Anbar Salvation Council
CAIR Council on American–Islamic Relations
FSA Free Syrian Army
ISIS Islamic State of Iraq and Syria
ISI Islamic State of Iraq
JASJ Jaysh Al-Sunna w’Al-Jamaat
JTJ Jamaat Al-Tawhid w’al-Jihad
MSC Mujahedeen Shura Council
NSA Non-State Actors
PKK Kurdistan Workers’ Party (Partiya Karkerên Kurdistanê)
SAA Syrian Arab Army
SDF Syrian Democratic Forces
VNSA Violent Non-State Actors
YPG People’s Protection Units (Yekîneyên Parastina Gel)
UN United Nations
US United States
ISIS has come under the spotlight and gained an unexpected amount of publicity in the last few years mostly because of its expansion: largely due to the failed state in Iraq and the Syrian crisis. However, ISIS is a terrorist group with insurgent qualities which has a track record of activity in the Middle East spanning at least the last two decades. Its ideological roots date back to the jihad in Afghanistan, and the Iraq War played a significant role in crystallizing its ideology which has exceeded that of Al-Qaeda’s in terms of its radicalism and extremism. The group has operated under different names in the Middle East, and differed from most of the other terrorist organizations by establishing an expansive territorial control in Iraq and Syria thanks to the vacuum created by the sectarian rule of Al-Maliki in Iraq and the uprising in Syria, precipitated by the brutal crackdown of the Assad regime. In comparison with other terrorist organizations, ISIS has established a highly hierarchical bureaucracy with functioning branches from security to education and social services\(^1\), and gained an access to rich financial resources which consequently made the group the richest of its kind. In other words, its weakened and invisible standing in the Middle East due to the “Sahwa councils”\(^2\) during the later periods of the invasion of Iraq changed dramatically, and it has become the number one threat in the eyes of the Western world as well as regional actors in the Middle East.

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\(^2\) The Sahwa (Awakening) Councils are tribal militia in Iraq that was composed of Sunni fighters which was established- with US support- to bolster security in their areas and fight against Al-Qaeda.
While ISIS went underground and maintained a low profile temporarily in Iraq, it first consolidated its manpower through participations and recruitment from the Syrian branch of Al-Qaeda, Jabhat Al-Nusra, then opted to fight against the Syrian insurgents to expand its territorial control in Syria. Meanwhile, it avoided clashes with the Assad regime whenever possible, except in areas even in areas with strategic importance, in order to not divide its fighting power and to establish itself as a strong violent non-state actor (VNSA) in Syria. In this process, the regime found that it could make use of ISIS in their fight against the Syrian insurgents. That is, ISIS was targeting the Syrian insurgents, diminishing their energy and ammunition, and forcing them to fight on simultaneous fronts. Additionally, the entrance of ISIS to Syria also damaged how the insurgents were perceived in the international public opinion which the regime had been unsuccessful in achieving by itself. This led the two parties, the regime and ISIS, to find a modus vivendi, and establish a mutually beneficial relationship that would last till today.

ISIS gained its current publicity in the international media with the quick capture of the second largest city in Iraq, Mosul. Thanks to the huge amount of financial resources and military equipment that ISIS gained in Mosul, it jumped up a level in terms of its organizational capacity and became the richest as well as militarily strongest VNSA in the world. This and the pornography of violence which it services through its media branches turned ISIS into the number one enemy of the international community. The Obama administration, for example, which opted out of any kind of military intervention in Syria, even after its redlines were crossed with the use of chemical weapons by the Assad regime, started a military campaign together with an international coalition when ISIS captured the strategically unimportant town of Ayn al-Arab (Kobane) on the border with Turkey. Local actors, ironically, have found an invaluable opportunity in this war against ISIS by availing themselves for the fight thereby
achieving two basic goals: mustering support from the international community and gaining legitimacy in the eyes of both local populations and the international community. In this manner, the PKK’s Syrian branch YPG and Hashd Al-Shaabi (People’s Mobilization Forces), which is under heavy Iranian influence, have fought against ISIS, supported by the United States and other coalition member states. The US buried old enmities with several Iraqi insurgent groups, such as Asaib Ahl-al-Haq, and ignored the fact that some of the groups which receive US help, including the YPG, have strong links with the groups that the US themselves have designated as terrorist organizations. Many actors including the US argue that the priority in fighting should be given to defeating ISIS, ignoring the root causes and the fertile ground on which ISIS has consolidated its power in Syria and Iraq; consequently Iran, the Assad regime and the YPG have benefited greatly from this strategy by expanding their spheres of influences and territorial control.

ISIS expanded its numbers rapidly thanks to the incoming foreign fighters from more than a hundred states from all corners of the world creating one of the largest armies, in terms of its manpower, in Iraq and Syria. It has also maintained territorial control over an area in Iraq and Syria that is effectively larger than some of the nation-states in the Middle East and elsewhere. Although ISIS has lost a considerable amount of territory in Iraq and Syria, since the beginning of the coalition airstrikes and the Operation Euphrates Shield, it still controls a large portion of land along the Syria-Iraq border, Raqqa, Deir ez-Zor and the areas along the Euphrates River up to north of Aleppo in Syria; Mosul and the stretch of land between the Syrian border along the Tigris River deep into the province of Nineveh in Iraq. As of today, the international coalition and various local groups are preparing or already executing a ground and air operation against ISIS in Mosul in Iraq; in Raqqa in North Syria. The YPG-dominated Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) are currently fighting against ISIS in the
countryside of Aleppo with the air cover of the United States. The Syrian insurgents are the ones who initiated the war against ISIS in the first place, in the earlier phases of the ISIS enterprise in Syria. They have been fighting against ISIS almost incessantly for the past three years and are currently clashing with the group north of Aleppo, under the Operation Euphrates Shield Ayn al-Arab (Kobane) East Qalamun and Deraa. In Iraq, the Peshmerga Forces, the Iraqi Army and the Hashd Al-Shaabi militias are continuing their fight against ISIS again with air support from the international coalition.

ISIS is not solely operating in Iraq and Syria. To the contrary, after consolidating its power in these countries and winning sensational victories in an astonishingly rapid manner, groups of varying sizes pledged allegiance to ISIS in Libya, Yemen, Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Algeria, Afghanistan, Northern Caucasus and Nigeria. Outside Iraq and Syria it only has territorial control in Libya and Nigeria; however, its sympathizers stretch all the way from Australia to the United States. The group has attracted thousands of foreign fighters from all around the world to join their ranks; and after the start of the coalition airstrikes and mobilization of the international community, ISIS activated some of its local assets or sent some of its militants back to their countries of origin, such as France, Turkey, Belgium, the United States, Indonesia, Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Libya and Yemen, where they continue to plot terrorist attacks. In this sense, ISIS is a group which has the capacity to carry out terrorist attacks globally either through its militants or sympathizers. This emphasizes the point that the fight against ISIS should not be limited to Iraq and Syria where the group openly operates, but using a variety of methods must be expanded to a larger geography with a strong coordination within the international community.

Media and propaganda have a significant place in ISIS’ strategy of terror, and the group use all communication channels especially the social media to disseminate their messages. Through
Hollywood-style propaganda productions and an army of users on Twitter and Facebook, ISIS clarified its ideology and aims, while trying to recruit more people. Even though there is an overwhelming volume of open sources to analyze the world of ISIS, these do not suffice to write a balanced and insightful analysis about the group. One of the reasons for this is the perception that ISIS cannot be analyzed through information and sources which the group intentionally disseminate. Furthermore, ISIS has undeclared aims and partnerships which further complicate understanding of its operation and rationale. ISIS which derived inspiration from its forefather, Abu Musab Al-Zarqawi, in shaping its violent agenda and operational methods has established direct or indirect pragmatic relationships with a number of actors, including Saddam era officers and the Assad regime; therefore, to adequately explain ISIS, one must transcend the popular narrative that has been circulating in the international media. There are numerous conspiracy theories regarding the establishment, expansion and operation of ISIS in the Middle East, a region where such theories abound. The main reason, probably, for the abundance of questions about the personal connections of its leader Abu Bakr Al-Baghdadi, the group’s ties with foreign intelligence agencies etc., is the unbelievably fast expansion of ISIS in Iraq and Syria, causing paradigm shifts and changing the game plan of many actors on the ground.

ISIS in its current form is a new phenomenon, although the group has a long history of terrorist activity and insurgency. After its rapid rise to power in Iraq and Syria, several works have been dedicated to the understanding of the organization; however, the very nature of the group has restricted the scope of research and availability of original materials on ISIS. Most of the works have focused on the history of the group in an effort to acquaint the Western reader with the basics of its growth and transformation.
This effort has mostly been borne out of a need to make sense of an organization which has dominated international news outlets with its use of violence, control of vast territory and claim for statehood. Again most of the studies conducted on ISIS are journalistic pieces, usually bringing together—some of them very chaotically—chronological developments regarding the group.

Efforts to go deeper in understanding ISIS and the use of primary sources are both rare. Difficulty in conducting research or journalistic activities in ISIS controlled areas, scarcity of sources except for those disseminated by the group mostly for propagandistic purposes, as well as the overwhelming domination of rumors and non-factual data have made studies on ISIS a herculean task. ISIS has not been a journalist or researcher-friendly group, and as a matter of fact, many journalists such as Steven Sotloff, were executed in cold blood by the group. Therefore, field research is almost out of the question due to its security risks when analyzing the group. This has left researchers with only a few options to collect data on the group, interviews with ISIS members or sympathizers being the most valuable asset to researchers. There are unfortunately not many studies which base their narrative, analysis and findings on in-depth interviews. As much as ISIS has a high amount of publicity, not enough academic attention has been paid so far to its study.

Amongst dozens of books on ISIS in English, only two stand out with their on-the-ground research, although both of them lack an academic framework and theoretical discussion. Nevertheless, both offer invaluable, on-the ground accounts of the group. *ISIS: Inside the Army of Terror* by Michael Weiss and Hassan Hassan deals exclusively with ISIS, making extensive use of interviews and available primary sources.3 The book is particularly successful in portraying the Iraqi

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3 Hassan H. and Weiss M. *ISIS: Inside the Army of Terror* (New York: Regan Arts, 2015)
link of ISIS and the modus vivendi between the group and the Assad regime. It offers valuable insights into the inner structure and web of relations of ISIS both in Iraq and Syria, where the Al-Maliki and Assad rules prepared the ground for the return of the group’s reign of terror. Charles Leister’s *The Syrian Jihad: Al-Qaeda, the Islamic State and the Evolution of an Insurgency* is more of a general reader about the Syrian uprising than a monograph exclusively discussing ISIS. The book presents a general picture of the uprising with details and anecdotes, while positioning ISIS in the wider conflict in Syria.

Three other works which offer more focused and compartmentalized analysis of ISIS deserve mentioning here. Jessica Stern and J. M. Berger’s *ISIS: The State of Terror* (2015) is particularly invaluable for its discussion of the terror aspect of ISIS. The book skillfully compares ISIS with Al-Qaeda, and argues that ISIS’ message is more concrete and appealing than Al-Qaeda’s which explains why ISIS could attract more people and began dominating the global jihadi networks. ISIS, unlike Al-Qaeda, offers its potential recruits a nascent utopia which came true with the declaration of the ISIS caliphate. William McCants’ *ISIS Apocalypse: The History, Strategy, and Doomsday Vision of the Islamic State* is again a focused study dealing extensively with the group’s apocalyptic vision, and how this vision shapes the group’s terror strategy. McCants demonstrates his great expertise on apocalyptic politics, and deciphers the messianic roots of ISIS ideology. Loretta Napoleoni’s *The Islamist Phoenix: The Islamic State (ISIS) and the Redrawing of the Middle East* is based


7 Napoleoni, L., *The Islamist Phoenix: The Islamic State (ISIS) and the Redrawing of the Middle East* (New York: Seven Stories Press, 2014)
mostly on journalistic accounts on ISIS; nevertheless offers valuable insights into the group’s unique position among other terrorist organizations. It is particularly successful in arguing that ISIS is not an ordinary terrorist group which the West can tackle with conventional methods. Napoleoni argues that ISIS offers a new model for “nation building” by using modern and unconventional methods including high-tech. However, besides the book’s detailed account of ISIS’ nature as a terror group it offers little about the organization’s inner workings and ideological roots of its strategy of terror.

In addition to the books in English, one must mention an invaluable book written in Arabic by Hisham Hashimi, an expert on Iraqi jihadi groups. In ‘Alam Daesh,8 Hashimi offers valuable insights into ISIS’ roots in Afghanistan and organizational evolution in Iraq. He travels back to 1980s to seek Al-Qaeda’s roots in the Soviet-Afghan War; talks in detail about Al-Qaeda in Iraq (AQI), Mujahedeen Shura Council and ISI; and analyzes ISI’s transformation into ISIS. The book compares the Iraqi and Syrian contexts to explain differences within the Salafi-jihadi groups in both countries. He particularly highlights the divergences between Al-Zarqaawi, Al-Zawahiri and Al-Qaeda as well as between Al-Baghdadi and Al-Golani. ‘Alam Daesh also gives apt space to the discussion of military strategies of ISIS and organizational structure of the group as well as a biography of its leader, Al-Baghdadi. Hashimi gives recommendations to combat ISIS terror militarily, ideologically and financially. The book is a very detailed account of ISIS; however, it is highly centered on ISIS in Iraq and fails to address the group’s presence and activities in Syria.

The State of Savagery: ISIS in Syria contributes to the existing literature on ISIS in three levels. Firstly, only a few minor studies (for example: Valensi, 2015) have so far attempted to utilize the

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ISIS case to test the validity of international relations theories and explain non-state phenomenon. This study however will approach ISIS from a theoretical –mostly constructivist- perspective to explain its ontology and operations. In addition, the ISIS case will be used to highlight the boundaries of the state and non-state actors (NSA) as discussed by dominant IR theories. Secondly, this study is based on field research, primary sources in several languages and numerous in-depth interviews with various actors on the ground. Years of research have been conducted inside Syria; in the border towns of Hatay, Gaziantep and Kilis; in Ankara and Istanbul; in Qatar, Iraq, Saudi Arabia, Jordan, United States, Belgium and France. Interviews in person, over VOIP services, phone and email, as well as via intermediaries were conducted with ISIS militants and affiliates, members of Syrian armed opposition from different groups with a wide range of ideological backgrounds, members of the Syrian political opposition, as well as with personal acquaintances of ISIS leader Al-Baghdadi and residents of the ISIS heartlands of Mosul and Raqqa. Thirdly, the study will offer insights on the understanding of the Syrian conflict by crystalizing the sides of the conflict and rightly underlining ISIS’ role in the conflict. ISIS is neither a pro-opposition nor an anti-Assad group, and confinement of ISIS to the predominant polarization of the Syrian conflict between the regime and the insurgents is essentially a dead end when trying to make sense of the group. This also has implications for the efficiency of the war on ISIS, as an efficient tackling of the ISIS problem requires deconstructing its ideology as well as its behavioral patterns in the conflict zone inside Syria.

Due to the nature of ISIS and the security situation inside Syria, the interviews were approached in several ways. When possible, the interviews were conducted in person. The remainder were carried out using VOIP services, phone, emails or intermediaries. The factual contents of the answers were cross-checked, and personal opin-
ions and feelings were carefully noted. Most interviewees currently or previously affiliated with ISIS turned down our interview requests due to security concerns, but some of them agreed to answer our questions after ensuring their anonymity. Their responses to the questionnaire enriched this study by bringing the ISIS worldview into picture. An invaluable source of information on the structure and worldview of ISIS were the Syrian insurgents, especially those who have either previous or current experience in the jihadi circles. In this sense, although noting the animosity and rivalry between ISIS and the Syrian insurgents, Jabhat Al-Nusra affiliated interviewees and other insurgents with jihadi backgrounds fighting in groups such as Ahrar Al-Sham and Jaysh Al-Islam etc. have brought invaluable insights on the advent of ISIS in Syria in general as well as the groups’ military, religious and political views. In addition to the in-depth interviews with the military actors on the ground, several other interviews were also conducted with the Syrian political opposition, international actors handling the Syrian file in both the West and the Middle East, diplomats and researchers.

In addition to the in-depth interviews, content analysis of several key sermons and statements as well as written material that has deeply influence ISIS’ ideological and organizational structure was also utilized. In this study, the content of two major understudied publications, one in Arabic and the other in English, were analyzed to answer the main research questions. The first one, Management of Savagery by Abu Bakr Naji, is an invaluable work in understanding ISIS’ strategy of terror. The second one is the English-language journal of ISIS, Dabiq, which not only signifies the messianic nature of the group but also updates the reader on ISIS’ developing strategies and ideological evolution.

This research used both purposive and snowballing samplings when doing in-depth interviews. Purposive sampling is a non-probability form of sampling which samples its cases/participants in a
strategic way so that those sampled are relevant to the research questions that are being posed. Snowball sampling, on the other hand, is a “technique in which the researcher samples initially a small group of people relevant to the research questions, and these sampled participants propose other participants who have had the experience or characteristics relevant to the research.” In this study, in-depth interviews were conducted with top level commanders of the armed groups, major political opposition figures as well as people with direct information about key ISIS figures. Also, while doing field work in Syria and on the Turkey-Syria border to conduct interviews with previously specified figures, additional interviews were also conducted with people proposed by initial interviewees.

In order to gauge the intensity of fighting and nature of relations between the Syrian armed opposition and ISIS, and the regime and ISIS; and also to determine ISIS’ position with regard to the Syrian conflict, a data set was created by this author listing the sequence of territorial control in a specific location by key parties on the ground. The data of ISIS’ territorial possessions and the patterns based on the question “Who did ISIS capture the territory from?” were created. In this manner, a sequence of territorial possessions has been demonstrated. This sequence starts with the regime’s control (R) of the whole of Syria before the beginning of the armed uprising. After the insurgency started the armed opposition (O) captured geographically scattered territory from the regime. Starting from the early periods when ISIS (I) got involved in the Syrian conflict, it turned against the armed opposition and captured territory from them through fighting and allegiances it received from the groups and tribes which previously fought in the ranks of the armed opposition.

9 Bryman, A., Social Research Methods. p. 418
10 Ibid. p. 424
As much as it is rewarding, doing research on a terror group as ISIS has many limitations. It goes without saying that doing fieldwork in ISIS territory is not only dangerous but also has fatal consequences. In addition to its dangerous nature, travelling to ISIS-controlled territory is not legally permissible therefore research could not be conducted in territory currently controlled by ISIS.

The secretive nature of ISIS poses another limitation to any researcher working on the group as many of their activities are not made public, not shared with outsiders, and kept only amongst a select group of people. This is also true for the militants who are not at the core structure of the group but move in the periphery. It should be borne in mind that not every single ISIS militant has the same motivation, background and expectations when joining ISIS. Many of them have differing experiences and varying involvement in the decision-making; therefore, share different -even conflicting- accounts about the same events. Another limitation comes from the fact that almost all parties involved in the Syrian conflict have strong ideas about ISIS. The on-going clashes, ISIS’ brutal strategy of terror, suicide bombings, oppressive rule and its role in legitimizing the Assad regime make many actors on the ground quite subjective about the group. This study therefore cross-checked every single claim and left out unsubstantiated strong opinions with regard to ISIS.

One can deal with ISIS from various perspectives; however, this study will focus principally on the group’s presence and activities in Syria, and on the role the Syrian crisis had in the transformation of the group. Having said this, considering the fact that there is a strong connection between ISIS’ activities in Syria and elsewhere, especially in Iraq, this study will inevitably transcend the borders of Syria and bring other countries into the picture. The first chapter of the study will discuss ISIS within the general framework of the non-state actors, specifically the violent non-state actors. The chapter will begin with the discussion of the NSA and VNSA in inter-
national relations theories, and question the relevance of the NSA in the international system. This chapter will demonstrate that classical IR theories fall short of fully explaining the emergence, expansion as well as current operations of ISIS as a VNSA, controlling contingent territory in two nation-states in which millions of people live. The Realist paradigm’s neglect of the non-state actors and liberalism’s over emphasis on economic motives in the formation of the NSA make these two approaches highly irrelevant in the case of ISIS. Constructivism is best placed to deconstruct the ISIS phenomenon as ideology plays a critical role in shaping ISIS’ strategies and endgame. After providing a brief literature review on the VNSA and finding an overall definition of the term, the chapter will assess ISIS to see to what extent it fits into the VNSA category. As will be discussed, there are common areas as well as divergences between the qualities of the VNSA and ISIS. Notwithstanding, ISIS should still be considered as a VNSA with additional qualities, some of which normally only states possess.

The group which would metamorphose into ISIS has its organizational and ideological roots in the earlier structures established by the Salafi-jihadi ideologues, such as Abdullah Azzam. Hence, a better understanding of the current manifestation of ISIS is aided by giving special emphasis to earlier forms of Salafi-jihadi experience. A closer look into the earlier forms of Salafi-jihadi experience in Afghanistan and Iraq demonstrates that ISIS is an aberration from the mainstream Salafi-jihadism as it differs greatly from the other groups due to its distinct understanding of jihad, abusive use of takfir, indiscriminate violence against Muslims and messianic approach to the caliphate. Abu Musab Al-Zarqawi is largely responsible for the creation of this new type of Salafi-jihadism that ISIS came to represent. The second chapter will underline Al-Zarqawi’s departure from Azzam’s ideas by discussing both figure’s approach to the concept of jihad, takfir and relations with the
other Muslim communities. This chapter will also give a first-hand account of ISIS’ leader Abu Bakr Al-Baghdadi. His life story starting from his ideologically formative years in the Islamic University in Baghdad until his ascension to the leadership position in ISIS gives unique insights on both organizational and ideological structure of the group. His rapid promotion within the ranks of the key jihadi movement is a striking example of upward mobility as it took him only around 5 years, after his release from the notorious Camp Bucca as an insignificant detainee, to become the leader of the jihadi enterprise in Iraq.

The third chapter will decode the ideological properties of ISIS by analyzing four key points. The first part will attempt to decipher the ideological roots of ISIS’ terror strategy by examining an influential book, Management of Savagery, by Abu Bakr Naji. The book is frequently quoted by the ideologues of the group, and the violent strategy it offers finds echoes in ISIS’ terror strategy. The next part will delve into the concept of “takfirism”, the practice of excommunicating other Muslims, which ISIS use to get a license for killing rivals who are Muslims. ISIS has a strong messianic belief that shapes the group’s understanding of the world and its strategies. Therefore, the next part will seek the messianic roots of ISIS phenomenon, while also exploring the messianic component in ISIS’ terror strategy. The last part will explain how central the concept of the caliphate is to ISIS ideology and what the caliphate entails as an endgame for the ISIS enterprise.

The fourth chapter will go deep into the organizational profile of ISIS by paying special attention to its militant profile. This chapter will delineate the hierarchy of the group, and question what this hierarchy means for the group’s operations both inside and outside Syria. The group has a generally accepted organizational structure with Al-Baghdadi at the head and coming under him his deputies in Syria, Iraq and several councils who deal with various tasks. The
frequent death of military and political leaders of ISIS leads to constant change making it difficult to keep track of the current leadership, and this chapter will demonstrate that -except for a few figures- system is more important than individuals. Having said this, it should be noted that the power games inside ISIS as well as its hierarchical structure are very sophisticated, and it would be wrong to approach ISIS solely as a military body. The role of foreign fighters in ISIS and motivations for joining the group will also be addressed by referring to the ideological codes of the group, discussing the nature of the Syrian crisis and the pragmatic reasons that some of the recruits have when joining ISIS. This chapter will discuss pulling and pushing factors, as well as the opportunities for and causes of the foreign fighter phenomenon that has been dominating the cadres of ISIS. It will also deal with the question of to what extent previous religious indoctrination is important for the new recruits, shedding light on the level of religious education amongst them.

ISIS came into being predominantly as an Iraqi phenomenon with Syria having a transformative effect on the group. There is surely an older history starting from the Afghan War in the 1980’s; however, the institutionalization of the predecessors of ISIS and the crystallization of ISIS ideology coincide with the years of American invasion in Iraq. During these years, ISIS in different names morphed into an Iraqi-dominated group, while still receiving foreign fighters thanks to the Assad regime’s facilitation, forming alliances with some tribes and Saddam era officers. These alliances and the Iraqi domination of the group would prove to be critical in shaping ISIS’ institutional identity and conduct.

ISIS’ transition into Syria was a critical step in terms of the transformation of the group from a low-profile insurgency into a transnational insurgent-terrorist organization with statehood claims. The last chapter will decipher the codes of this transformation by focusing on ISIS’ encounter and clashes with the Syrian armed opposi-
tion, and its complex and tacit ties with the Assad regime. This chapter will demonstrate that, as wrongly argued by many observers; ISIS is not a part of the Syrian insurgency against the Assad regime. Rather, it maintained a separate agenda from the Syrian armed opposition which has been trying to topple the Assad regime but stay within the existing system. ISIS, to the contrary, rejects the system both politically and territorially in its entirety, and aims to establish a caliphate which has no geographical constraints and limits. Syria, therefore, has not been central to its endgame, although certain localities inside Syria such as Dabiq retain messianic importance according to ISIS’ ideology. ISIS’ modus vivendi with the Assad regime and the fact that it has fought more with the Syrian armed opposition rather than the regime also position the group under a unique category in the complex matrix of the fighting sides in Syria.
ONE  THE ONTOLOGY: IS ISIS A STATE?
This book discusses ISIS within the context of violent non-state actors (VNSA); analyzes historical, ideological and operational roots and features of the group in Syria; and positions ISIS within the matrix of the conflicting parties in Syria. Although there are aspects of ISIS which do not fully overlap with the definitions of the VNSA, ISIS is still an organization that is on the border of holding qualities of a state in the Westphalian sense. ISIS is the pinnacle of the Salafi-jihadism and takfiri-messianism, and a living example of the Salafi-jihadi’s power of transformation according to changing dynamics on the ground. The group has been particularly skillful in benefiting from chaos by filling in the vacuum left by the failed states, Syria and Iraq. The group’s groundwork was laid down by Abu Musab Al-Zarqawi, who differed both practically and ideologically from Al-Qaeda. The differences between the Al-Zarqawi and Bin Laden schools morphed into active conflict in later periods; as ISIS consolidated its power and began dominating the Salafi-jihadi community.

This work demonstrates that ISIS is not a part of the Syrian insurgency against the Assad regime. Rather, it has maintained a separate agenda from the Syrian armed opposition, which has been trying to topple the Assad regime but stay within the existing system. ISIS, to the contrary, rejects the system both politically and territorially in its entirety, and aims to establish a caliphate which has no geographical constraints or limits.