Shifting recognition orders: the case of the Islamic State

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Introduction

When looking at the role recognition plays in political contexts, the Islamic State presents a particularly complex and multifaceted case, reflecting the complexities of recognition relationships and their political consequences overall. Approaching our subject from a recognition theory perspective, we identify two main difficulties. First, the status that relevant actors ascribe to the Islamic State (and its predecessor organisations, which we include unless otherwise noted) is multifaceted and, at times, contradictory. This is even more the case for the status the group ascribes to itself. There is significant change over time regarding what the Islamic State is and wants to be recognised for; a regional protecting power; a quasi-state entity; a transnational Caliphate. Secondly, these changes in status, both ascribed and self-ascribed, entail changes regarding the traits for which the group seeks recognition. While violence plays an important role both in other actors denouncing the group and in the group’s own claims to legitimacy, this is by no means the only element in the complex set of recognition-relevant properties. Any thorough analysis of what we term the ‘recognition orders’ (see below) to which the Islamic State is party must also take account of the group’s claims to uphold public order, to represent a divine regime, to act as a religious-political force of unification, as a potent military force and as a liberator from common enemies (for a detailed analysis of the Islamic State’s sources of authority see Günther and Kaden 2016).

Throughout its history, the Islamic State has claimed recognition for its mission, accomplishments and status from among Sunni Muslims in general, potential supporters of its cause in particular, and a range of Salafi-jihadi ideologues and other Salafi-jihadi militant groups. Since these claims have frequently been linked with threats of violence against those who deny the
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In what follows, we will describe the sets of traits identified by the Islamic State’s ideologues in official statements during four organisational stages since 2003, namely a small-scale rebel group (A) until 2006; the gradual turn into a proto-state between 2006 and 2014 (B), until it reached the height of its power as a self-proclaimed Caliphate until 2016 (C). After 2016 and until the present time (February 2019), the group can be characterised as a rebel group (D). Against this backdrop, we identify recognition orders established by the Islamic State’s ideologues, that is, the entirety of
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social, political and military actions produced by and productive of the specific traits for which the Islamic State’s ideologues sought recognition at a certain point in time. Reconstructing the self-image that the Islamic State’s ideologues sought to present, we also draw attention to the potential audiences they addressed to gain recognition as a meaningful actor in and beyond a violent conflict in Iraq and Syria.

Analysing recognition orders: conceptual considerations

As we will show in the sections below, the history of the Islamic State and its predecessor organisations reveals them to be highly volatile in terms of the content and scope of the recognition they demand. In order to capture this volatility, we divide our analysis of recognition claims and acts into a number of specific questions. In this, we follow authors who have introduced further differentiation within the general category of recognition. Most notably, we are indebted to Biene and Daase’s (2015) introduction of the notion of ‘recognition as’, by which they differentiate between different grades of recognition of an actor as a party to a conflict, as a participant in informal talks, as a participant in formal talks, or as the (sole) representative of a people or group. In the context of our topic, we feel it necessary to further broaden the range of possible acts of and claims to recognition-as-something by treating it as a generally open category to be filled by the various empirical claims of the actors involved.

Our second inspiration stems from Hofmann and Görzig’s (2015) analysis of the ‘dark side of recognition’, where the authors differentiate between active (granting) and passive (receiving) recognition. Recognition, in Hofmann and Görzig’s analysis, turns dark when the conditions for a group to receive the recognition it wants preclude it from getting it. Their example deals with Palestine, where the cooperation between Fatah and Hamas would be a precondition for its ability to recognise Israel (this is Palestine’s active recognition), but at the same time would preclude Israel from recognising Palestine (this is Palestine’s passive recognition). Since in this case active and passive recognition are mutually exclusive, the recognition order precludes a resolution of the underlying conflict. For our purposes, we add to this concept another differentiation within the category of passive recognition, namely between the recognition sought by and the recognition granted to an actor. Between these two elements of passive recognition, paradoxical effects resembling Hofmann and Görzig’s dark side of recognition can also occur.

Equipped with these conceptual tools, we propose two different sets of analytical questions, the answers to which reveal the complex recognition
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regime of which the Islamic State is part. The first set queries the actor(s) granting or denying recognition:

- For what traits is an actor recognised?
- As what kind of actor are they recognised?
- By whom/in what capacity is the act of recognition performed?
- If applicable, to what point in time or period is the act of recognition referring?

In all cases where we speak of actor(s) granting or denying recognition, we also include the possibility of conscious or unwitting non- or mis-recognition by the actor(s). In our perspective, recognition exists where the way in which an actor answers the above set of questions is met by another set of answers given by the addressee of the actor’s recognition. The condition of a recognition relation existing as such is an overlap between the answers the granting actor gives to the above set of questions, and the answers the object of recognition gives to the following second set of questions, which mirror the first.

- For what traits does an actor want or not want to be recognised?
- As what kind of an entity does an actor want or not want to be recognised?
- By whom? Not by whom?
- Referring to what point or period in time?

We call an order of recognition the entirety of social actions that serve primarily or partly as answers to these two sets of questions by actors involved (or desired to be involved) in a process of recognition. By matching the answers to these two analytical sets, it is possible to identify to what extent and in what regard a recognition relationship exists. Likewise, an identification of the roots and scope of mis- or non-recognition is possible by analysing a mismatch between the answers given to the two sets. Finally, our concept also allows for the possibility of recognition, non-recognition and mis-recognition existing simultaneously with regard to different aspects of the recognition regime.

We feel that one advantage of this approach is that it renders it possible to treat the definition of recognition in any particular case as an empirical question, based on how the actors involved in creating and maintaining recognition orders determine the directions and goals of their recognition efforts at any given point in time. At the same time, our concept makes clear that any act of recognition, in order to be characterised as such at all, needs to be viewed as a social relationship based, in Weber’s classic formula, on any action ‘taking[ing] account of that of the others and is oriented in these terms’ (Weber 1978: 26). In what follows, we will sketch elements of the
order of recognition of which the Islamic State and its predecessor organisations were part. Based on a broad range of authoritative statements by the Islamic State’s ideologues, we aim to show that the recognition order changed as a result of the organisation’s development, and underwent, largely simultaneously, profound changes in terms of the group’s self-image and self-positioning, its geographical scope and the degree of differentiation between its addressees, as well as the traits claimed and those from which the group sought to distinguish itself.

The development of the Islamic State’s status and recognition order

Looking at the Islamic State and its predecessors from a historical perspective, four phases of organisational evolution can be discerned. Between 2003 and 2006, the group that was to become the Islamic State can best be described as a small-scale rebel group (A). Between 2006 and 2014, it gradually turned into a proto-state (B), until it reached the height of its power as a self-proclaimed Caliphate until 2016 (C). After 2016 and until the present time (February 2019), the group can be characterised as a rebel group (D). The organisational evolution of the group in part went hand in hand with shifts and adaptations in its ideology which are related to the persons involved and to factors within and outside the group influencing its ideology and action.

Each organisational stage entailed changes in the way in which the ideologues of the Islamic State and its predecessors demanded and received recognition by other actors and themselves granted recognition to others. To depict those characteristics, we have selected twenty-three recorded speeches as well as a few texts and videos in Arabic from the above-mentioned phases of the development of the Islamic State. They were created by core actors within the group, that is, its ‘official spokesperson’ (al-mutāḥaddīth al-rāsī), its military leader, leading clerics or the ‘commander of the faithful’ (amīr al-muʾminīn). Each of these statements offers a general description of the respective current state of affairs within the group and delineates its motives and goals. Using a hermeneutical approach, we have reconstructed the Islamic State’s order of recognition as it presents itself in these statements, and correlate this with secondary sources on the general development of the group.

Our approach, however, is limited in that we do not attempt to map out the entirety of contemporary and historic references and sources of legitimacy the Islamic State and its predecessor organisations feed into the respective recognition regimes. Still, we acknowledge that the construction of a plausible historicising narrative of salvation is eminent in the Islamic State’s legitimation.
and delegitimation strategies. We also deliberately reduce the polysemy of certain social categories and functions, while knowing that for groups like the Islamic State, whose ideology is dominated by religious frameworks, any political, social and economic collective it relates to is primarily significant in religious terms. The context is of great importance in this regard. For instance, a reference to ‘Democrats’ in Ḥāḍha waʾd Allāh (This is the Promise of God; see below) must be understood as a religious reference, because the intra-textual context designates them as the ones who deviate from divine ordinances, hence creating the ‘wrong ummah’. In some cases, the same actor appears multiple times in different contexts and with different designations. For example, in several speeches of the Islamic State’s leadership the Muslim community, the ummah, is on the one hand designated as a religious actor while on the other it is framed as a political actor, too (see for example al-ʾAdnānī 2014b; al-Baghdādī 2014b; al-Zarqāwī 2004b).

Looking at how our first set of analytical questions can be answered with regard to the first phase of the group’s history, we find the following characteristics. The group, back then first operating under the label of al-Tawhīd waʾl-Jihād and since October 2004 formally affiliated with the al-Qaeda network and calling itself Tanẓīm Qāʾidat al-Jihād fi-Bilād al-Rāfidayn, was predominantly recognised by those actors opposing its ideology and cause. The traits deemed significant were those that designated it as a violent actor in contradistinction both to the official political structure and competing jihadi groups. Its members were labelled as ‘merciless sectarian’ slaughterers (Burns 2006; Whitaker et al. 2006) and ‘insidious’ (Warrick 2015: 220). Predominant characterisations of the group and its leaders were their rejection of secularisation and democracy; moreover, their interpretation of Islamic sources was criticised as faulty (see Günther 2014: 170–173). Overall, the group was recognised as a terrorist group by critics, but also as a force strengthening the resistance against Iraq’s occupation by some others.

The main reference groups performing the acts of recognition by attributing the group the above-mentioned traits and characterising it in the ways mentioned were, first of all, the US-led multinational forces and their provisional government structures in Iraq as well as the Iraqi governmental authorities under the lead of Iyad Allawi, Ibrahim al-Ja’fari and Nuri al-Maliki and their executive apparatus. Seeking to stabilise the country in the wake of a growing resistance involving groups from various religious, social and political backgrounds, US authorities singled out the group’s leader as ‘high value target number one’ (Hashim 2006: 142) and some of the power-holders declared “Jordanian terrorist” Abū Muṣʿab al-Zarqāwī
as the mastermind behind the Iraqi insurgency’ (Ritter 2005), thereby fuelling the mythical charging of a person whose actual executive power within the resistance is still being debated. Despite severe criticism of his military methods and rigid interpretation of Islam’s holy scripture from several Sunni groups and individuals who were sympathetic to or actively supporting the resistance, al-Zarqāwī had been successful in merging a plethora of foreign volunteers with local forces and Sunni resistance groups (Fisher and Wong 2004). He thus forged alliances that granted his group a sustainable local basis and support from the population that recognised his group among others as legitimate fighters against multinational occupation (United States Institute of Peace 2005: 12–14).

With regard to the second set of questions, we identify the following claims to recognition by the group. During this early phase, it wanted to be recognised for being relentless and perseverant in its struggle. From the outset, it presented itself as ‘right-minded’, faithful, meek, strong and capable of fight. Al-Zarqāwī himself emphasised these traits in almost all his speeches that circulated as audiotapes both on the internet and on the ground. For example, in his first audio recording from January 2004, entitled *Ilḥaq bi ʾl-qāfīla* (Join the Caravan), he pledges that his group will ‘remain fracturing the throats of the tyrants and a controlling sword on the necks of the oppressors and soldiers for Islam protecting it’ (al-Zarqāwī 2004a). In early 2006, the aforementioned self-ascribed traits were extended to include the group’s capacity to govern justly.

From the very beginning, the claims to recognition were predominantly directed towards the Sunni population. The group strove to motivate and acquire a broad base in the Sunni population, which was often equated with the whole Muslim community. Al-Zarqāwī emphasised the prominent position of all (Sunni) fighters and asserted their value as ‘the chosen few of the ummah, its first line of defence, its safety valve and its well-built fortress ... the ever watchful, guardian rock upon which the American arrogance has crumbled’ (al-Zarqāwī 2005a). Insisting on the motif of a ‘brotherhood of jihad [comprising] both muhājirīn and anṣār [i.e. foreign volunteers and local supporters]’, al-Zarqāwī (2004b) also tried to facilitate alliances with other groups, calling on ‘the heroes in Iraq, God bless your brothers, rush to their aid. This battle is one of the decisive and historic battles between Islam and the unbelievers [in which] the mujahideen will strike as one’ (al-Zarqāwī 2004c). In light of the group’s position in the Iraqi Sunni Arab resistance against the US-led occupation and the new government, al-Zarqāwī’s rigid interpretation of Islam and his self-ascribed capacity as a vanguard put him and his group in a situation of competition with many Iraqi Sunni scholars. Hence, it is not surprising that he criticised their reluctance to call on the local population to fight on the part of his
In many of his speeches he accused them of having ‘reconciled with the tyrants and handed over the land and the people to the Jews, the Crusaders and their followers among our apostate rulers when you remained silent about their crimes, feared to preach the truth to them, and did not succeed in bearing the banner of jihad and monotheism’ (al-Zarqāwī 2004a).

In all this, the group aimed to be recognised as a severe threat to the occupational forces and the newly instated governmental structures: the new government, its administrative, legislative, judicial and executive branches, as well as those religious and/or political groups supporting it. ‘To you Bush, you Roman dog, we swear by Allah that you will not enjoy rest or a place of rest, your military will never be able to relax in our lands, as long as blood pulses through our veins and our hearts beat’ (al-Zarqāwī 2005a). Similar threats were also directed against the international military coalition in general (al-Zarqāwī 2004b), and against Jews, Shiites and other religious groups (al-Zarqāwī 2006).

This last point reveals that the group also wanted to be recognised as a severe threat to the heterogeneity of Iraq’s religious, social and cultural domain by all religious communities other than Sunni, in particular the Shia, which al-Zarqāwī had singled out early as the major ‘enemy within’ the Islamic community (Günther 2014: 134–138, 165–170; Johannsen 2008: 3–11). This ultimately led him to defend the killing of civilians and call for an ‘all-out’ war against the Shia as a whole (al-Zarqāwī 2005b, 2005c, 2005d, 2005e).


By 2006, the group’s attacks on Shiite civilians in particular were one of many causes of violent civil conflicts that erupted at that point, causing tens of thousands of civilian casualties and massive displacements across the country. However, multinational and Iraqi troops were eager to regain agency and to end the undermining of state authority. To this end, they began large-scale recruitment in predominantly Sunni towns and regions and specifically targeted the leadership of al-Qaeda in Iraq, resulting in the death of its most prominent figure, Abū Muṣʿab al-Zarqāwī, in late 2006. In the light of these developments, we can assume that al-Zarqāwī’s heirs were rather forced to act. Against all odds, however, they managed to lay the foundation of what would soon emerge as one of the most powerful social revolutionary movements in the Middle East, presenting the most eminent threat to the integrity of local nation-states: the Islamic State.

In accordance with the general increase in violent struggle during these years, the way the group was perceived and the traits for which it was recognised changed gradually, not substantially. Consequently, the
answers to the first set of analytical questions remain largely the same, though there is evidence that the claim to be a state also entailed forms of moderation for which the group sought recognition. In what follows we will highlight changes in nuance and substance in the group’s claims to recognition.

In a video released in 2010, excerpts from a lecture by Abū Anas al-Shāmī, one of the group’s ideologues, concisely repeated the group’s claims and the traits for which it wanted to be recognised:

We fight until the entire world worships [according to] the sharī‘a of God the Great and the Almighty, until the world is ruled with the Book of God and the Sunna of the Prophet – peace and prayer be upon him – and until Islam extends its rule over the worlds and spreads its wings on earth in the light of the sharī‘a of God the Great and Almighty. (Al-Furqān Media 2010).

This basic doctrinal statement that references Q. 8:39, that is, the claim to disseminate tawḥīd (monotheism), exert power according to divine ordinances and fight against anything that diverts from it, constitutes the main line of creedal continuity connecting the Islamic State and any of its predecessors. Particularly in the formative period of the Islamic State in Iraq (ISI) (dawlat al-‘Irāq al-islāmīya) from late 2006 onwards, the group elaborated on these principles in various authoritative documents and statements, seeking to underline its claim to legitimacy and fundamental change (al-Baghdādī 2007a; al-Furqān Media 2007).

However, Abū ‘Umar al-Baghdādī, who had succeeded al-Zarqāwī as the leader of al-Qaeda in Iraq and, after the establishment of the ISI, had been inaugurated as amīr al-mu’minīn (Leader of the Faithful), emphasised that the organisation’s members were responsible for meeting the expectations increased by claiming the rank of a proto-state. In a statement released in April 2007, he addressed the Islamic State’s fighters in particular: ‘My sons, the soldiers of the Islamic State: Oh mujahideen, do not stop a river you caused to flow by making sacrifices, or demolish an edifice you have raised by your efforts. Do not consider everyone who disagrees with you an adversary, and do not consider everyone who accompanies you a friend. Those who disagree with you may be among your best friends. Be like the sea that is not unsettled by buckets, and be forgiving, for God gives strength and pride to the forgiving’ (al-Baghdādī 2007a).

Beyond these invocations, the ISI notably sought to establish forms of rebel governance that could help undergird its claim on transformation into a pristine Islamic order and breathe life into the ISI’s claim for a social contract between the amīr al-mu’minīn and their subjects. Accordingly, the group’s leadership issued several messages between 2007 and 2009 that outlined the institutionalisation of governance structures, and the group’s
media wings increasingly disseminated footage of governmental services provided by the Islamic State to local populations (Günther 2014: 200–234).

Likewise, while the general goal of uniting the Sunni population remained a core claim of the group, it also already sought recognition for having achieved this to an extent. Abū ʿUmar al-Baghdādī argued in a statement released in April 2007 in which he reviewed the last four years of jihadi activities in Iraq, that the Sunnis had gained ‘a clear goal [and many] dividends on the side of monotheism, morals, and worship in general [, because with the help of God] the people of Iraq today are among the greatest peoples on earth in terms of safeguarding monotheism’ (al-Baghdādī 2007a). In this speech, al-Baghdādī also promised that the Islamic State would remain (bāqiya), thereby portending a keyword that the Islamic State would extol as part of its motto when it rapidly grew in 2014, ‘To Remain and Expand’ (bāqiya wa-tatamaddad).

Together with its increased status as a military power, the group stepped up its claims to recognition by other Sunni rebel groups as the sole legitimate representative. Abū ʿUmar al-Baghdādī repeatedly called on other groups to unite under his command. In a speech of April 2007, shortly after he had been inaugurated as amīr al-muʾminīn by the Mujāhidīn Shūrā Council, he directly addressed several of the largest Sunni rebel factions:

Oh brothers in the Anṣār al-Sunna and of Jaysh al-Mujāhidīn, the friendship between us is deep. The bonds of faith and love are too great and strong to be harmed. Oh my sons in the Jaysh al-Islāmī know that I am prepared to shed my blood to spare yours, and offer my honour to protect yours. By God, you will hear from us only what is good, and you will see from us only what is good. Rest assured, for what is between us is stronger than what some people think, may God forgive them. ... We owe it to God to protect your blood and the blood of every Muslim who has not committed an act of open idolatry or shed blood when he is forbidden to do so. Fear God and do not forget the lofty goal, namely that the word of God prevails, not abhorrent nationalism. (Al-Baghdādī 2007a)

In contrast to his earlier statements, Baghdādī also called on ISI’s fighters to strike against those Sunni tribal factions that formed the so-called Awakening Councils (ṣaḥawāt or abnāʾ al- Irāq) who, encouraged and supported by the US military, had begun to drive back ISI forces from larger areas in western Iraq (al-Baghdādī 2007b): ‘We call on all mujahideen to come together under one banner, the banner of “There is no god but God; Muhammad is the messenger of God,” one methodology, one amīr, in one army, for one purpose: the sovereignty of the sharīʿa so that the word of God may be the highest and the word of the infidels the lowest’ (al-Baghdādī 2010).

The group’s claims to represent a severe threat to the occupying forces and Iraqi government structures were exacerbated over time, with the duration
of the struggle becoming a claim to recognition of its own. In the aforementioned audio tape of April 2007, Abū ʿUmar al-Baghdādī outlined ‘the thorns that the infidel occupier and his apostate henchmen picked’.

First: Four years of strikes and humiliation which make some sides here and there sacrifice their honour. The honour of the age’s Satan and today’s idol, the United States, led by their most stupid obeyed one, Bush, was rolled in the dust. Second: Exhausting the US budget at the expense of social security, health, and education so that the money of the collaborating Gulf governments has failed to meet American needs. … The collapse of US army morale and the increase of suicide cases and escape attempts, and chronic organic and psychological cases such as permanent tremor. (Al-Baghdādī 2007a)

In the last part of this second phase of the group’s existence, it extended its threats to include Syria and the Assad regime, thus adding another element to its claims to recognition by the Sunni populace. In an audiocassette that was released on 9 April 2013, Abū Bakr al-Baghdādī, who had succeeded Abū ʿUmar al-Baghdādī as the head of the ISI and been declared anīr al-muʾminīn by the organisation’s Shūrā Council, proclaimed the establishment of the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (dawlat al-islāmiyya fi ‘l-ʾIrāq wa ‘l-Shām; ISIL), bringing with it the entry into the battlegrounds of the Syrian civil war that had begun to unfold two years earlier (al-Baghdādī, 2013). He stated that they would ‘extend our wide hands and open our arms and hearts to the factions doing jihād for the sake of God Almighty and the proud tribes in the beloved land of al-Shām to make God’s word the highest and that the people and land may be ruled by the laws of God Almighty’ (see also al-ʿAdnānī 2014a). Addressing the Sunni population in Syria in January 2014, he said that

... your blood is our blood and your destruction is our destruction. We fight in God’s path and for his satisfaction and we do not fear the blame of blamers. Don’t be deceived by the media for you will find us the kindest towards you and the harshest towards your enemies. God knows that we tried our best to defend Muslims and then overnight we are accused of making takfir on the Syrian population. (Al-Baghdādī 2014a)

Phase (C): Caliphate (2014–2016)

On 29 June 2014/1 Ramadan 1435h, the ISIL’s official spokesman declared the (re-)establishment of the Caliphate for all Muslims (al-ʿAdnānī, 2014b). The document and the claims to recognition it makes represent a significant change in comparison to the group’s earlier phases. In what could be termed a dual universalism, the group now claims to be the sole legitimate representative of all Muslims, with Abū Bakr al-Baghdādī being named Caliph Ibrāhīm to whom all Muslims owe an oath of allegiance. The declaration emphasises
the state-like qualities of the administration the group exerts and also the personal traits of Abū Bakr that make him worthy of exerting the office of Caliph (see also Turkī al-Binʿalī 2014). At the same time, the group claims universal political significance, which translates into claims of recognition by Western powers and Sunni groups of all kinds in all areas, as well as all of the actors already referred to by the Islamic State in earlier phases. In addition to a broadening of the category of recognition-by-whom, the group broadens its claims to recognition-for-what, when it not only emphasises its military might and religious righteousness as before, but also its global political significance, its unique importance in alleviating social evils besetting the ummah, and its ideological and organisational superiority to all other attempts at ameliorating Muslims’ plight.

Only two days after al-ʿAdnānī’s proclamation, a speech by Abū Bakr al-Husaynī al-Qurashi al-Baghdādī had been published, who had just been inaugurated Caliph Ibrāhīm by the Islamic State’s Shūrā Council. On the one hand, this speech – his inaugural note, one may argue – emphasises the exceptional significance of the holy month for testing one’s individual faith, and al-Baghdādī uses it to call for people to join and intensify military jihad. On the other hand, it becomes clear that in this speech al-Baghdādī marks the beginning of a new phase in the Islamic State’s evolution. Al-Baghdādī notably widens the Islamic State’s focus from Iraq and Syria to ambitions to defend the global Muslim community:

Muslims’ rights are forcibly seized in China, India, Palestine, Somalia, the Arabian Peninsula, the Caucasus, al-Shām, Egypt, Iraq, Indonesia, Afghanistan, the Philippines, Ahvaz, Iran, Pakistan, Tunisia, Libya, Algeria and Morocco, in the East and in the West. So, raise your ambitions, oh soldiers of the Islamic State! For your brothers all over the world are waiting for your rescue and are anticipating your brigades. (Al-Baghdādī 2014b)

In this rhetoric, the Islamic State claims recognition as the spearhead of a global conflict that ‘is the Muslims’ war altogether. It is the war of every Muslim in every place’ (al-Baghdādī 2015). Conversely, this recognition of the plight of Muslims in the countries mentioned by the Islamic State’s leadership opens up a host of new venues for recognition of the Islamic State as the legitimate defender of Muslims’ rights everywhere, and consequently a significant increase in its global prestige that mirrors its increased sense of political status.

In focusing on global affairs, al-Baghdādī also seeks to shield the Islamic State from accusations of terrorism. While the group’s ideologues had always framed their fighters’ deeds in light of defence of (and retaliation for) Muslim lives in Iraq and Syria, al-Baghdādī here lists war crimes committed under the pretext of ‘counterterrorism’ and eventually even adopts the label terrorist, because ‘terrorism is to refer to God’s law for judgment. Terrorism is to
worship God as He ordered you. Terrorism is to refuse humiliation, subjugation, and subordination to the infidels. Terrorism is for the Muslim to live as a Muslim, honourably with might and freedom. Terrorism is to insist upon your rights and not give them up’ (al-Baghdādī 2014b). In this instance, the group confronts what it perceives as (normative) mis-recognition and reframes it according to its own goals and justifications.

The change in status the group ascribed to itself by framing itself as the Caliphate opened up new sources for legitimation, and consequently new historical claims to recognition. In his much-noticed public sermon on the first Friday of this Ramadan, al-Baghdādī underlined the claims for acceptance by the Muslim community as he sought to capitalise on the memories of the Caliphate that are an eminent part of the cultural memory in many societies in the Middle East and North Africa region and beyond. He stated that the Islamic State’s followers ‘declared the Caliphate and instated an imam, and this is a duty upon the Muslims – a duty that has been lost for centuries and absent from the reality of the world and so many Muslims were ignorant of it. The Muslims sin by losing it, and they must always seek to establish it, and they have done so, and all praise is due to God’ (al-Furqān Media 2014).

During this phase, the Islamic State not only made significant territorial gains and enjoyed a large clientele, particularly from outside Syria and Iraq. It also notably upgraded its capabilities in partaking in the war of images, feeding the internet and classical media with audiovisual media replete with high-quality pictures that helped to underline the self-image of the Islamic State and earned it (grudging) recognition as a media producer, too (Gruber 2019). The most notable change in topics covered by its media wings in comparison with the above-mentioned phases was intimately tied to the Islamic State’s effective exertion of authority over considerable territories in Iraq and Syria. Accordingly, the Islamic State’s media extensively covered ‘the good life’ in the Caliphate, among which the staging of the implementation of an own currency certainly was a capstone in 2015 (see al-Hayat Media Center 2015), as well as other aspects of its rule in photo reports, videos and textual publications. In contrast to the phase between 2006 and 2014, the Islamic State’s leadership had institutionalised and bureaucratised its rule in many aspects and wanted this to be recognised.

Al-Baghdādī also notably exacerbated his rhetoric in the upcoming months that saw intensifying fights between the still expanding Islamic State and the Iraqi and Syrian military, their international allies and various non-state actors. The universalist language that had been characteristic of messages by the Islamic State’s leadership was gradually superseded by a focus on particularities in terms of battlegrounds and groups referenced in the communiqués (see al-Baghdādī 2015)

Although the group had always relied on the Prophet Muhammad’s example, references to his armed conflicts between June 2014 and June 2016 were clearly pushed into the background, and instead his example as head of the early Muslim community was emphasised as the Islamic State referred to itself as khilāfa ‘alā minhāj al-mubūwa (Caliphate in the Prophetic Methodology). This changed again when military pressure on the group increased and it had to retreat from its former strongholds across Iraq and Syria by the summer of 2016. At that time there were frequent references to battles in which the Muslim community faced a numerically and materially far superior number of opponents and yet won the battle because of their faith. The so-called ‘battle of the trenches’ (maʿrakat al-ahzāb), which the Islamic State’s leadership and al-Zarqāwī had referred to frequently in the first and second phases mentioned above, recurred even more frequently in the summer of 2016, in particular in analogies likening the battle for Mosul to the battle for Medina between the first Muslim community and tribal forces from Mecca in 627 (see al-Baghdādī 2016). The Islamic State’s leadership also referred to territorial losses as a test from God and emphasised that its fighters had to prove values such as steadfastness, endurance and perseverance. Its recognition regime had, by the summer of 2016, hence turned back to an increased emphasis on the military qualities of the group (al-ʿAdnānī 2016; al-Baghdādī 2016, 2017, 2018).

The Islamic State’s leadership also constantly called on its (potential) followers to either join the fight on the battlefields in Iraq, Syria, Libya or elsewhere, or to otherwise take action in any location worldwide to terrify their enemies (al-Baghdādī 2017, 2018).

Despite its loss of territory and personnel in this phase, the Islamic State still sought to uphold the image of a well-performing bureaucracy. Particularly in their audiovisual media, the Islamic State’s leadership reiterated the differentiated structure of the administrative and bureaucratic apparatus that was the spearhead of fundamentally changing the social, religious, cultural and political sphere in the territories under the Islamic State’s control (see al-Furqān Media 2016).

Conclusion

Referring back to the conceptual outline we presented at the outset of this chapter, it becomes clear that the recognition order the Islamic State created for itself changed considerably over time, and in conjunction with its military and political development on the ground. As a result of its rise,
it created for itself the image of a universal liberator of the ummah, which also changed the traits for which it sought recognition, and the time frame of its narrative. Unsurprisingly, with regard to the second set of questions we proposed, the kind of recognition given by the increasing number of recognition-granters included in the recognition order created by the Islamic State never matched the group’s aims, and the mismatch between what the Islamic State wanted to be recognised as and for by all kinds of actors grew as its power grew. At the height of its power, it was almost universally condemned as a terrorist group while its claims to recognition increased beyond comparability with other armed non-state actors. Paradoxically, the very same reasons the Islamic State gave to legitimate its claims to recognition are among the reasons its potential recognition-granters denied the Islamic State the kind of recognition it sought. This is why we see here a case of the ‘dark side of recognition’, where the conditions for passive recognition not only preclude it from being granted, but also reproduce the conflict underlying the recognition order.

The perspective we employed makes visible that these aspirations for ‘thick’ recognition (Wendt 2003: 511–512) are accompanied by, and indeed are based on, promises of ‘thin’ recognition the Islamic State grants groups from which it seeks legitimation, and herein lies the potential for actual matches between the Islamic State as a recognition-seeker and the recognition-granters. Most prominently, this refers to its basic reference group, the ummah, which it claims to lift from oppression and poverty, thus guaranteeing the status of the reference group’s members (individual Muslims) as ‘sovereign person[s] rather than an extension of someone else’ (Wendt 2003: 511–512) (e.g. an object of colonial subjugation).

Looking at the development over time, the kinds of recognition the Islamic State or its predecessor groups seek can be roughly characterised as gradual (cf. Biene and Daase 2015), depending on the self-ascribed status as a local, regional or transnational power, and the respective functions and prestige attached to these statuses. At the same time, the change over time in the Islamic State’s position and status makes it hard to apply a recognition-theoretical model that is based on a set of ranked positions oriented towards the ‘gold standard’ of international political recognition.

Our findings imply that the first set of questions can also be framed to guide normative discussions about recognition in that it can be used to focus debates about whether certain actors, such as armed non-state actors, should be recognised: as what, for what, in what capacity and regarding what time frame? With easing of tensions and prevention of (further) violence being general goals of recognition, it is striking that the Islamic State’s self-ascribed status often appears as an explicitly violent group praising its ability to exert acts that constitute a priori obstacles to any reconciliation.
The most obvious example is its attempt to justify its status as an Islamic State in Iraq by pointing to its ability to kill soldiers of the US-led coalition occupying Iraq, and its contrasting this with the lack of effective resistance by its competitor groups in Palestine (al-Jubūrī 2006). In our view, this feature of the for-what dimension of the Islamic State’s recognition regime makes it hard to believe that, in this particular case, recognition can ‘incentivize moderation in means’ (Biene and Daase 2015: 222). However, we realise that the idea cannot be ruled out that gradual recognition can be applied to potentially decrease the overall violence exerted by the group and its successor organisation(s), simply because the ‘recognition events’ (Biene and Daase 2015) that have taken place towards the Islamic State, such as recognising it as a party to a conflict, remain below the threshold of inducing desired behaviour. Still, we see very clear limits to this, since, for instance, recognition of the Islamic State as ‘representative of a collective’ (Biene and Daase 2015: 224) is hampered by the fact that there is significant overlap in the claims to representation by the group itself and groups that could perform acts of recognition in the first place, that is, groups that represent Sunni Muslims whom the Islamic State claims to represent in their entirety through the entity of the Caliphate. Consequently, we argue that there is significant potential for the ‘dark side of recognition’ (Hofmann and Görzig 2015) to come to the fore in any attempt at recognising the Islamic State with regard to any of the dimensions discussed in this chapter.

Notes

1 We acknowledge that in order to paint a complete picture of the recognition order in any given case, it would be necessary to extend the view to also include, as a third set of questions, the way in which the group in question acts as a giver of active recognition, and how active and passive recognition influence each other.

2 This classification partly builds on Bunzel (2015).

3 [And fight them until there is no more fitna and the religion [worship] will all be for Allah alone [in the whole of the world]. But if they cease [worshipping others besides Allah], then certainly, Allah is All-Seer of what they do.]

4 The act of declaring someone an unbeliever, hence denying him/her the status of a Muslim, which has a range of ontological and social consequences.

References

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Al-Furqān Media (2010), Intafidat hayya 2 [Video].


