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Life Under ISIS

One of the Strangest States Ever Created

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It is one of the strangest states ever created. The Islamic State wants to force all humanity to believe in its vision of a religious and social utopia existing in the first days of Islam. Women are to be treated as chattels, forbidden to leave the house unless they are accompanied by a male relative. People deemed to be pagans, like the Yazidis, can be bought and sold as slaves. Punishments such as beheadings, amputations and flogging become the norm. All those not pledging allegiance to the caliphate declared by its leader, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, on 29 June last year are considered enemies.

The rest of the world has watched with fascinated horror over the past eight months as Isis, which calls itself Islamic State, imposed its rule over a vast area in northern Iraq and eastern Syria inhabited by six million people. Highly publicised atrocities or acts of destruction, such as burning to death a Jordanian pilot, decapitating prisoners and destroying the remains of ancient cities, are deliberately staged as demonstrations of strength and acts of defiance. For a movement whose tenets are supposedly drawn from the religious norms of the 7th century CE, Isis has a very modern and manipulative approach to dominating the news agenda by means of attention-grabbing PR stunts in which merciless violence plays a central role.

These are not the acts of a weird but beleaguered cult, but of a powerful state and war machine. In swift succession last year, its fighters inflicted defeats on the Iraqi army, the Iraqi Kurdish

Peshmerga, the Syrian army and Syrian rebels. They staged a 134-day siege of the Syrian-Kurdish city of Kobani and withstood 700 US air strikes targeting the small urban area where they were concentrated before finally being forced to pull back. The caliphate's opponents deny it is a real state, but it is surprisingly well organised, capable of raising taxes, imposing conscription and even controlling rents.

Isis may be regarded with appalled fascination by most people, but conditions inside its territory remain a frightening mystery to the outside world. This is scarcely surprising, because it imprisons and frequently murders local and foreign journalists who report on its activities. Despite these difficulties, The Independent has tried to build up a complete picture of what life is like inside the Islamic State by interviewing people who have recently lived in Sunni Arab cities like Mosul and Fallujah that are held – or, in the case of Ramadi, the capital of Anbar province, 80 per cent held – by Isis.

Christians, Yazidis, Shabak and Shia, persecuted by Isis as heretics or idolaters, fled or were killed last year, so almost all of those interviewed are Sunni Arabs living in Iraq, with the exception of some Kurds still living in Mosul.

The aim of the investigation is to find out what it is like to live in the Islamic State. A great range of questions need to be answered. Do people support, oppose or have mixed feelings about Isis rule and, if so, why? What is it like to live in a place where a wife appearing on the street without the niqab, a cloth covering the head and face, will be told to fetch her husband, who will then be given 40 lashes? How do foreign fighters behave? What is the reaction of local people to demands by Isis that unmarried women should wed its fighters? More prosaically, what do people eat, drink and cook, and how do they obtain electricity? The answers to these and many other questions show instances of savage brutality, but also a picture of the Islamic State battling to provide some basic services and food at low prices.

A point to emphasise is that none of those interviewed, even those who detest it, expect Isis to go out of business soon, although it is coming under increasingly effective pressure from its many enemies. These include the US, Iran, the Iraqi army, Shia militias, Iraqi Kurdish Peshmerga, Syrian Kurds and the Syrian army, to name only the main protagonists. Anti-Isis forces are beginning to win significant victories on the battlefield and the odds are heavily stacked against the Islamic State. Over the past week some 20,000 Shia militiamen, 3,000 Iraqi security forces, 200 defence ministry commandos and 1,000 Sunni tribesmen have been fighting their way into Tikrit, Saddam Hussein's home town.

"The numbers are overwhelming," said General Martin Dempsey, Chairman of the US Joint Chiefs of Staff, claiming that there are only "hundreds" of Isis fighters pitted against this massive pro-government force, although other reports suggest it may be closer to 1,000.

The fall of Tikrit would be a serious reverse for the Islamic State, though it is easy to exaggerate its impact. Isis claims that its victories are divinely inspired, but it has never felt duty-bound to fight to the last man and bullet for its every stronghold. It describes its strategy of fluid manoeuvre as "moving like a serpent between the rocks". Long a purely guerrilla force, it is at its most effective when it launches unexpected attacks using a deadly cocktail of well-tried tactics

such suicide bombers, IEDs and snipers. These are accompanied by well-made films of atrocities broadcast over the internet and social media, directed at frightening and demoralising its enemies.

Isis may be retreating, but it can afford to do so, since last year it seized an area larger than Great Britain. Its strength is not just military or geographical but political – and this is a point raised by many of those interviewed. The dislike and fear that many Sunni Arabs feel for Isis is balanced and often outweighed by similar feelings towards Iraqi government forces. At the heart of the problem is the fact that last year Isis seized the leadership of the Sunni Arab communities in Iraq and Syria through its military victories.

So far no credible Sunni alternative to Isis has emerged. An assault by Iraqi government, Shia militia or Kurdish Peshmerga on Mosul would probably be resisted by the Sunni Arabs as an attack on their community as a whole.

"The Kurds cannot fight for Mosul alone because they are not Arabs," says Fuad Hussein, chief of staff of Kurdish President Massoud Barzani. "And I don't think the Shia militias would be willing to fight there; and in any case, local people would not accept them."

If no alternative to Isis emerges for the Sunni to rally to, then all the six million or so Sunni Arabs in Iraq may be targeted as Isis supporters, regardless of their real sympathies. In the long term, Isis could turn out to be the gravedigger of the Sunni Arabs in Iraq, where they are 20 per cent of the population, by stoking the hostility of the other 80 per cent of Iraqis, who are Shia or Kurds.

The Islamic State was declared in the weeks after the capture of Mosul, Iraq's second city, by Isis on 10 June 2014. It was only then that countries around the world began to wake up to the fact that Isis posed a serious threat to them all. Reorganised under Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi in 2010 after the death of the previous leader, Isis took advantage of the Syrian uprising of 2011 to expand its forces and resume widespread guerrilla warfare. Sunni protests against mounting repression by the Baghdad government transmuted into armed resistance. In the first half of 2014 Isis defeated five Iraqi divisions, a third of the Iraqi army, to take over most of the giant Anbar province. A crucial success came when Isis-led forces seized the city of Fallujah, 40 miles west of Baghdad, on 3 January 2014 and the Iraqi army failed to win it back. This was the first time that Isis had ruled a large population centre and it is important to understand how it behaved and how and why this behaviour became more extreme as Isis consolidated its authority. The stories of two men, Abbas (generally known as Abu Mohammed) and Omar Abu Ali, who come from the militant Sunni strongholds of Fallujah and the nearby town of al-Karmah, explain graphically what happened during those first crucial months when Isis was in power.

Abbas is a 53-year-old Sunni farmer from Fallujah. He recalls the joyous day when Isis first entered the city: "At the beginning… we were so happy and called it 'the Islamic Conquest'. Most of the people were offering them feasts and warmly welcoming their chief fighters."

Isis told people in Fallujah that it had come to set up an Islamic state, and at first this was not too onerous. A Sharia Board of Authority was established to resolve local problems. Abbas says that

"everything was going well until Isis also took Mosul. Then restrictions on our people increased. At the mosques, local imams started to be replaced by people from other Arab states or Afghanistan. During the first six months of Isis rule, the movement had encouraged people to go to the mosque, but after the capture of Mosul it became obligatory and anybody who violated the rule received 40 lashes." A committee of community leaders protested to Isis and received an interesting reply: "The answer was that, even at the time of the Prophet Mohamed, laws were not strict at the beginning and alcoholic drinks were allowed in the first three years of Islamic rule." Only after Islamic rule had become strongly entrenched were stricter rules enforced. So it had been in the 7th century and so it would be 1,400 years later in Fallujah.

Abbas, a conservative-minded community leader with two sons and three daughters in Fallujah, said he had no desire to leave the city because all his extended family were there, though daily life was tough and getting tougher. As of this February, "people suffer from lack of water and electricity which they get from generators because the public supply only operates three to five hours every two days". The price of cooking gas has soared to the equivalent of £50 a cylinder, so people have started to use wood for cooking. Communications are difficult because Isis blew up the mast for mobile phones six months ago, but "some civilians have managed to get satellite internet lines".

However, it was not harsh living conditions but two issues affecting his children that led Abbas to leave Fallujah hurriedly on 2 January this year. The first reason for flight was a new conscription law under which every family had to send one of their sons to be an Isis fighter. Abbas did not want his son Mohamed to be called up. (Previously, families could avoid conscription by paying a heavy fine but at the start of this year military service in Isis-held areas became obligatory.)

The second concerned one of Abbas's daughters. He says that one day "a foreign fighter on the bazaar checkpoint followed my daughter, who was shopping with her mother, until they reached home. He knocked on the door and asked to meet the head of the house. I welcomed him and asked, 'How I can help you?' He said he wanted to ask for my daughter's hand. I refused his request because it is the custom of our tribe that we cannot give our daughters in marriage to strangers. He was shocked by my answer and later attempted to harass my girls many times. I saw it was better to leave." Abbas is now in the Kurdistan Regional Government area with his family. He regrets that Isis did not stick with its original moderate and popular policy before the capture of Mosul, after which it started to impose rules not mentioned in sharia. Abbas says that "we need Isis to save us from the government but that doesn't mean that we completely support them". He recalls how Isis prohibited cigarettes and hubble-bubble pipes because they might distract people from prayer, in addition to banning Western-style haircuts, T-shirts with English writing on them or images of women. Women are not allowed to leave home unaccompanied by a male relative. Abbas says that "all this shocked us and made us leave the city".

A more cynical view is held by Omar Abu Ali, a 45-year-old Sunni Arab farmer from al-Karmah (also called Garma) 10 miles north-east of Fallujah. He has two sons and three daughters and he says that, when Isis took over their town last year, "my sons welcomed the rebels, but I wasn't that optimistic". The arrival of Isis did not improve the dire living conditions in al-Kharmah and he didn't take too seriously the propaganda about how "the soldiers of Allah would defeat [Iraqi

Prime Minister Nouri al-] Maliki's devils". Still, he agrees that many people in his town were convinced by this, though his experience was that Saddam Hussein, Maliki or Isis were equally bad for the people of al-Kharmah: "They turn our town into a battlefield and we are the only losers."

Al-Kharmah is close to the front line with Baghdad and endures conditions of semi-siege in which few supplies can get through. A litre of petrol costs £2.70 and a bag of flour more than £65. Omar tried to buy as much bread as he could store to last his family a week or more "because even the bakeries were suffering from lack of flour". There was constant bombardment and in February the last water purification plant in town was hit, though he is not clear if this was done by artillery or US air strikes: "The town is now in a horrible situation because of lack of water."

Omar spent five months working for Isis, though it is not clear in what capacity, his main purpose being to prevent the conscription of his two sons aged 14 and 16. Rockets and artillery shells rained down on al-Karmah, though Omar says they seldom hit Isis fighters because they hid in civilian houses or in schools. "The day I left a school was hit and many children were killed," he recalls.

He says US air strikes and Iraqi army artillery "kill us along with Isis fighters. There is no difference between what they do and the mass killings by Isis." Omar had been trying to flee for two months but did not have the money until he managed to sell his furniture. He is now staying outside Irbil, the Kurdish capital, where his sons and daughters work on local farms which "is at least better than staying in al-Kharmah".

He says the Americans, Iraqi government and Isis have all brought disaster and lists the wars that have engulfed his home town in the past 10 years. "All of them are killing us," he says. "We have no friends."