



Combating Terrorism Center

AT WEST POINT



THE CALIPHATE COMPLAINT BOX

STORIES OF ISLAMIC STATE GOVERNANCE
IN THE WORDS OF THOSE WHO LIVED IT

Daniel Milton and Muhammad al-`Ubaydi | July 2024

The Caliphate Complaint Box: Stories of Islamic State Governance in the Words of Those Who Lived It

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The views expressed in this report are the authors' and do not necessarily reflect those of the Combating Terrorism Center, United States Military Academy, Department of Defense, or U.S. Government.

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Cover Photo: A photo of a suggestions and complaint box, previously officially published by the media office of Wilayat al-Raqqah

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Some time ago, my colleague Brian Dodwell and I found ourselves reading through troves of material captured from the battlefield as coalition military forces battled against Islamic State fighters and attempted to roll back their territorial control over large portions of Iraq and Syria. We already knew that the group was heavily bureaucratized, but both of us were taken aback at the nature of internal complaints and dissent we happened to come across. We thought it would be an interesting and valuable research effort to bring those documents to light. As Brian's time was consumed by leadership of the Combating Terrorism Center (CTC) and other projects, I tried to nourish the seed of an idea that we both had. In his leadership role at CTC, Brian provided nothing but enthusiastic encouragement and support for this project, without which Muhammad and I never would have been able to reach this point. Additionally, he provided his expert eye on the final draft of this product and offered many useful comments.

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Despite all of the efforts of so many wonderful individuals, any errors or oversights remain the fault of the authors.

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Executive Summary

In the summer of 2014, the terrorist organization known as the Islamic State declared itself the governing entity of a vast swath of territory across Iraq and Syria encompassing millions of people, who were now ‘citizens’ of the Islamic State. Although it is well-known that the group’s governance approach carried with it the strict and sometimes violent implementation of their interpretation of Islamic law, there has been comparatively limited evidence regarding the nature of the complaints that arose during this time. This report relies on 396 previously unreleased primary source documents created by both members and civilians of the Islamic State highlighting problems encountered under the group’s governing eye—the Caliphate Complaint Box.

These documents provide a vivid first-hand account of the challenges people faced living under the Islamic State. They demonstrate that, despite the group’s propaganda effort to highlight its establishment of a just society with a well-functioning government, the reality on the ground was much different. Given that any single analysis or summary cannot capture all the nuance included in these documents, the Combating Terrorism Center is releasing all of these documents through its website in an effort to promote future research on the Islamic State. However, this report does highlight some of the initial findings from an analysis of the material:

The Islamic State faced regular bureaucratic challenges. Despite the promise of being different than other forms of government, the Islamic State struggled to keep track of paperwork and people, at times leading to confusion and disillusionment among those living under its control.

Women living in the caliphate faced an uphill battle. Although perhaps not surprising, these documents drive home the inequity faced by women in the caliphate when it came to resolving issues of concern. Several complaints show women having to repeatedly seek help in order to provide for their families after losing husbands. Additionally, the documents contain multiple examples of men in positions of power targeting women with abuse.

Citizens suffered raids and harsh treatment by both religious and security-oriented police. The laws of the Islamic State were strict, but these documents show that the execution of justice could be both harsh and uneven. People living in the caliphate might find their children hit during a raid or their vehicle confiscated at a checkpoint without a clear indication as to why or what the resolution would be.

The Islamic State military bureaucracy faced challenges in recruiting, equipping, and managing its forces. The Islamic State was a group formed through military conquest. The Complaint Box documents show that, despite these successes against an array of external adversaries, the group’s military wing struggled with issues, including but not limited to the production of military weapons, leadership of training units and battlefield forces, and putting soldiers in the right units and places.

Introduction

On July 4, 2014, when Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi ascended the staircase inside the Great Mosque of al-Nuri in Mosul, Iraq, it was to be his first appearance as the leader of what he termed to be the new Islamic State. During the speech that followed, al-Baghdadi made a very specific promise regarding what this new state would bring:

O Muslims everywhere, glad tidings to you and expect good. Raise your head high, for today – by Allah’s grace – you have a state and khil fah, which will return your dignity, might, rights, and leadership. It is a state where the Arab and non-Arab, the white man and black man, the easterner and westerner are all brothers.¹

Clearly, al-Baghdadi’s promise and vision for this new state was that it would be one of unity and equality, where people would live under the Islamic State’s interpretation of sharia law without distinction in terms of their ethnicity, where they came from, or what they looked like. Beyond unity, the group promised a well-functioning system in which people could feel safe, secure, and cared for by a just, Islamic government.²

And, as a motivating vision to encourage people to come, it appears to have resulted in some level of success. A number of studies showed significant diversity in those who came to the caliphate, some expressing a belief in the image of a state propagated by al-Baghdadi and the group’s prolific media machine.³ In addition to those who came, estimates suggest that as many as 10 million residents of Iraq and Syria ended up under the control of the Islamic State, subject to its vision of governance whether they liked it or not.⁴

Within five years after the Islamic State established its caliphate, the Global Coalition Against Daesh and the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) handed the group a military defeat, depriving the group of overt control of their territorial holdings in Iraq and Syria.⁵ And, according to many reports from media organizations and governments from around the world, the Islamic State’s governance efforts failed to deliver on the group’s utopian promises.⁶ Reports emerged of economic intimidation of businesses, infighting among members, loss of qualified workers due to fear and intimidation, food shortages, and so on.⁷

Despite these negative reports, it seems that the Islamic State continues to believe in and spread the narrative that its governance project, despite ending after only a few years, was successful in achieving a just society and avoiding the corruption, decadence, and shortcomings of the societies it aims to replace. Indeed, even amidst the loss of its self-claimed caliphate, the group held up what it achieved as a marker of its potential. In March 2019, its spokesperson, al-Muhajir, stated that every province

1 Author’s (Milton) personal collection of Islamic State material.

2 Some scholars have identified a strong theme of utopianism in the group’s propaganda materials. Charlie Winter, *The Virtual ‘Caliphate’: Understanding Islamic State’s Propaganda Strategy* (London: Quilliam, 2015); Tara Mooney and Gareth Price, “Utopia, war, and justice: The discursive construction of the state in ISIS’ political communications,” *Journal of Language & Politics* 21:5 (2022): pp. 675-696.

3 Brian Dodwell, Daniel Milton, and Don Rassler, *The Caliphate’s Global Workforce: An Inside Look at the Islamic State’s Foreign Fighter Paper Trail* (West Point, NY: Combating Terrorism Center, 2016)

4 “Islamic State and the crisis in Iraq and Syria in maps,” BBC, March 28, 2018.

5 “Islamic State group defeated as final territory lost, US-backed forces say,” BBC, March 23, 2019.

6 Ben Hubbard, “ISIS Promise of Statehood Falling Far Short, Ex-Residents Say,” *New York Times*, December 1, 2015.

7 Joanna Paraszczyk, “The ISIS Economy: Crushing Taxes and High Unemployment,” *Atlantic*, September 2, 2015; Pamela Engel, “Infighting between foreign fighters is hurting ISIS,” *Telegraph*, February 20, 2015; Archit Baskaran, “The Islamic State Healthcare Paradox: A Caliphate in Crisis,” *Inquiries* 7:7 (2015); Rachel Roberts, “Civilians trapped in Mosul ‘having to eat cats’ due to food shortage as battle between Isis and allied forces intensifies,” *Independent*, February 20, 2017; Aymenn Jawad Al-Tamimi, “Complaints Against the Islamic State’s Media Department Head,” *aymennjawad.org*, December 25, 2018; Cole Bunzel, “Ideological Infighting in the Islamic State,” *Perspectives on Terrorism* 13:1 (2019): pp. 13-22; Aymenn Jawad Al-Tamimi, “Dissent in the Islamic State: ‘Hashimi Advice’ to Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi,” *aymennjawad.org*, January 4, 2019.

stood to “witness ambitions and sharpen the generation of the Khilafah that hunts to do more ...”⁸ More than two years later, on December 16, 2021, the group’s weekly Arabic-language publication, *Al Naba*, asserted that its governance project had been successful and that where its implementation of sharia law had ended, nothing had been achieved except for “humiliation and loss.”⁹

Currently, the Islamic State’s governance efforts are minimal. However, in addition to remaining militarily engaged in areas in which it previously conducted governance activities such as Iraq and Syria, it has also expanded its military footprint in Africa.¹⁰ As of the time of this writing, its observable non-military activities in Africa seem to be limited as compared to what the group was able to achieve in the time before and after the formal declaration of the caliphate in the summer of 2014. It has most certainly conducted preaching activities in Africa. Additionally, one expert that closely follows the group noted that the Islamic State’s West African province had shown signs of activity as early as 2020 before being formally highlighted by the group itself in mid-2021.¹¹ Even if these efforts appear limited, there is little doubt that if the group continues to establish military control, more frequent and substantive governance attempts will follow.¹² And given the group’s demonstrated reliance on institutional experience and procedures, it is likely that the challenges it faced before in governance are likely to foreshadow the challenges it will face in the future.

This clashing of narratives regarding the Islamic State’s governance success or failure is unlikely to be resolved, regardless of one’s own biases and predispositions regarding the ‘right’ answer. The goal of this report is not to conclusively answer whether the Islamic State’s governance was good or bad. Instead, the goal of this report is to use the group’s own internal documentation to increase the collective understanding regarding the nature of its governance struggles. Using a newly released batch of 396 primary source documents, this report illustrates how the governance and military bureaucracies of the Islamic State faced complaints from both civilians and soldiers alike. These complaints emerged as a result of regular bureaucratic challenges, but also due to the group’s ideology, which limited the ability of women to seek redress and created a wide array of friction points related to religious behavior. The group also struggled with poor leadership in terms of its military and governance efforts, as well as from potential abuse by security personnel.

A Brief Overview of the Complaint Box Documents

For many years, the CTC has been able to work with a number of partners within the U.S. government and Department of Defense (DoD) to declassify and release material captured by U.S. military forces on battlefields around the world in order to increase the collective understanding of militant organizations. The CTC’s general effort is known as the Harmony Program, and it has produced works that have illuminated interesting dynamics related to the use of foreign fighters, the strife between jihadis and other militant groups, the internal challenges among members, and the media practices of these organizations.¹³ The documents for this project are being released as part of the Harmony

8 Author’s (Milton) personal collection of Islamic State material.

9 The author of this article was generally addressing his comments to the broader community of Muslims and potential supporters, meaning that all they had suffered in the time since the group’s territorial defeat was “humiliation and loss.” Author’s (Milton) personal collection of Islamic State material.

10 “ISIL doubled territory it controls in Mali in less than a year: UN,” *Al-Jazeera*, August 27, 2023.

11 Aymenn Jawad Al-Tamimi, “The Islamic State’s Imposition of Zakat in West Africa,” *aymennjawad.org*, May 28, 2021.

12 Tricia Bacon, Austin C. Doctor, and Jason Warner, *A Global Strategy to Address the Islamic State in Africa* (The Hague: International Centre for Counter-Terrorism, 2022); Aaron Y. Zelin, *The Islamic State on the March in Africa* (Washington, D.C.: Washington Institute for Near East Policy, 2024); Caleb Weiss, “Analysis: Islamic State’s current da’wah campaign across Africa,” *FDD’s Long War Journal*, April 5, 2024.

13 For examples, please refer to the following CTC products. Brian Fishman and Joseph Felter, *Al-Qa’ida’s Foreign Fighters in Iraq: A First Look at the Sinjar Records* (West Point, NY: Combating Terrorism Center, 2007); Brian Fishman, *Dysfunction and Decline: Lessons Learned from Inside Al-Qa’ida in Iraq* (West Point, NY: Combating Terrorism Center, 2009); Daniel Milton, *Pulling Back the Curtain: An Inside Look at the Islamic State’s Media Organization* (West Point, NY: Combating Terrorism Center, 2018).

Program and will be available for others to examine. The documents were obtained by the DoD as part of military operations against the Islamic State, mostly in Iraq and Syria.

Although these documents were obtained by the U.S. DoD, they were created by individuals working and interacting with the Islamic State's bureaucratic structure, who likely had no reason to believe that these documents would ever become public knowledge. It is this fact, that those creating and using this information likely had no external motivation to lie or to downplay the veracity contained therein, that makes them such an interesting resource for understanding Islamic State governance efforts. Of course, the nature of a complaint lends itself to the possibility of exaggeration for effect or embellishment by the individual, but not because of concerns of influencing an external third-party.

While not all of the documents included a date of authorship, the majority of them did (about 89%). The breakdown of documents used in this report by year is shown in Figure 1. As shown, a very small number of documents come from either 2014 or 2018, while the bulk appears to have been created from 2015 to 2017. Despite this relatively narrow temporal range, it represents a period of time in which the Islamic State was in great transition. The 2015 time period may have been seen to be the group's highwater mark, when it produced a maximum of propaganda and governed the largest swath of territory.¹⁴ Both of these metrics (propaganda produced and territory controlled) showed a fairly steady decline from 2015 onward. The Iraqi government stated that it fully defeated the Islamic State in Mosul in July 2017.¹⁵ The Syrian Democratic Forces, together with coalition support, was able to achieve victory against the Islamic State in Raqqa in October 2017.¹⁶ Eventually, all of this culminated in the final territorial defeat of the group in early 2019 with the conclusion of the Battle of Baghuz.¹⁷

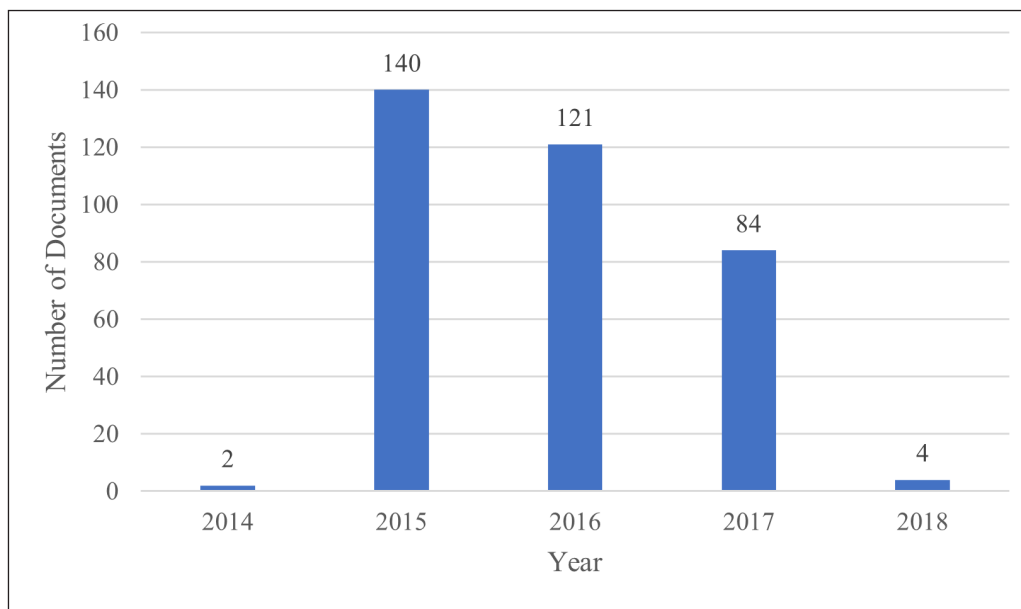


Figure 1: Number of Documents, By Year

14 Daniel Milton, *Down, but Not Out: An Updated Examination of the Islamic State's Visual Propaganda* (West Point, NY: Combating Terrorism Center, 2018).

15 Tim Arango and Michael R. Gordon, "Iraqi Prime Minister Arrives in Mosul to Declare Victory Over ISIS," *New York Times*, July 9, 2017.

16 Arwa Damon, Ghazi Balkiz, and Laura Smith-Spark, "Raqqa: US-backed forces declare 'total liberation' of ISIS stronghold," CNN, October 20, 2017.

17 Cameron Glenn, Mattisan Rowan, John Caves, and Garrett Nada, *Timeline: the Rise, Spread, and Fall of Islamic State* (Washington, D.C.: Wilson Center, 2019).

It is worth noting that, despite the temporal range of the data here, this is not to suggest that the Islamic State did not have processes to collect and address complaints prior to this point. Indeed, such efforts pre-date even the formal establishment of the caliphate in the summer of 2014. When Fallujah fell in early January 2014, it was only a matter of days before the group established a Virtue and Vice Committee, with one of its primary responsibilities being “to receive the complaints of the Muslims to address injustices and support the oppressed,” to include those who were already members of the group.¹⁸ Approximately four months earlier, an Islamic court was established by the group in Deir ez-Zor, Syria, with similar responsibility for receiving complaints.¹⁹ In the same timeframe, the Islamic State’s governor in Aleppo was taking action based on an “accumulation of complaints.”²⁰

These documents not only represent different challenges that the Islamic State may have experienced across time, but there is also some geographic diversity from across the territory in which the Islamic State implemented its governance vision as well.²¹ Although there are a small number of documents from Yemen, the rest come from within different provinces established by the group in Iraq and Syria. Figure 2 presents the geographic breakdown of these documents.²²

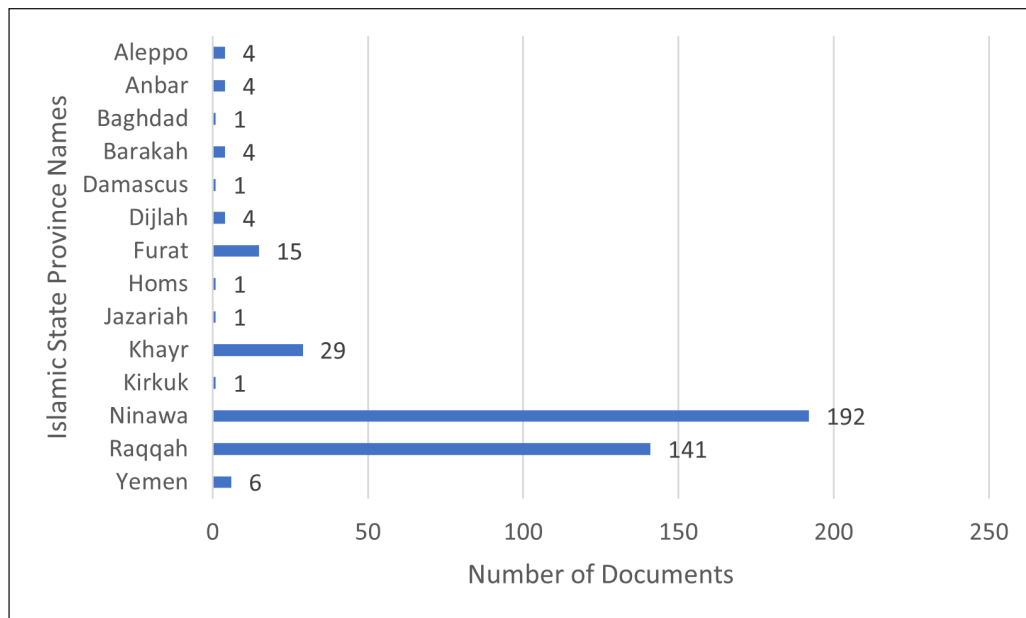


Figure 2: Distribution of Complaint Box Documents by Islamic State Province

There are a few important points to consider as it relates to the geographic facet of this collection of documents.

First, it is clear that the bulk of the documents with an ascertainable location come from two provinces: Ninawa and Raqqa. These provinces were home to two cities, Mosul and Raqqa, which were heavily

18 Liz Sly, “Al-Qaeda force captures Fallujah amid rise in violence in Iraq,” *Washington Post*, January 3, 2014. For the memo establishing the Virtue and Vice Committee in Fallujah, see Specimen 1N in Aymenn Al-Tamimi’s “Archive of Islamic State Administrative Documents.”

19 Specimen 5Q in Aymenn Al-Tamimi’s Archive.

20 Specimen 7F in Aymenn Al-Tamimi’s Archive.

21 For the purposes of both simplicity and consistency, CTC researchers only assigned a province to a document if it was issued with the letterhead or other symbol of the province. Even if some geographic markers were mentioned in the actual text of the complaint, CTC researchers did not code that information. Thus, there is likely more geographic detail available within these documents that may be of interest to future researchers.

22 The authors identified a small number of documents as coming from multiple provinces, making the total sum 404.

featured in Islamic State propaganda as examples of the heights of what the group hoped the caliphate could achieve. Some have even referred to these two cities as the “capitals” of the caliphate, although the group itself never applied such a designation. As a result, there is a possibility that documents illustrating the governance challenges faced by the group in these two cities may not be representative of challenges everywhere. On one hand, the fact that these areas had larger populations may have made them harder to govern. If this is true, then perhaps the large number of complaints from these areas reflects the challenge of governing lots of people. On the other, the fact that these two areas meant so much to the group may indicate that they were the focal point of the group’s best efforts at governance. If this latter explanation is true, it may mean that problems highlighted in documents from these areas are less frequent and/or intense than what one would expect from other areas. It is impossible to say which of these two (or any other) implications may be correct, but as is so often the case, the truth may lie somewhere in between.

Second, it is important to recognize the fact that most of the documents come from a certain period of time and mostly within Iraq and Syria. This may be seen as one limitation of these documents, especially given the continued geographic expansion of the group into Africa that continues into the present day. Still, the Islamic State is a group that has shown itself to have significant organizational tendencies and follows patterns in many of its activities. The group’s province in Tarabulus, Libya, created a standard complaint form, a document designed to allow an individual to renounce a previously made complaint, and a “complaint” option on a form for messages to the provincial governor.²³ This suggests both that there are more documents similar to those in the Complaint Box collection in locations not covered in this report, but also that when the group does establish governance, the collection of complaints is likely to be a part of that process. Moreover, it would be surprising if some of the structures, processes, and challenges highlighted in this report did not appear on some level in any location that the group tried to implement its approach to governance in the future.

In the next section, the report offers a general description of how these documents came to be within the context of the Islamic State’s bureaucratic system.

The Lifecycle of a Complaint

The genesis of most of these documents begins with an individual complaint or grievance of some sort.²⁴ A small number of them appear to be letters written by individuals who were offering their observations about events happening in the territory control by the Islamic State during the above referenced time period. If an individual had a complaint, there were multiple pathways through which they were able to file the complaint, depending on (1) the individual’s role in the Islamic State and/or (2) the nature of the complaint itself. If an individual was a member of the group, especially a soldier, then that would impact where they could file the complaint. Also critical was the nature of the complaint itself, because there were multiple offices within the Islamic State’s bureaucracy designed to handle complaints of relevance to their work.

It may be helpful to consider the process of filing complaints in the context of the overall organizational structure of the group as presented in a July 12, 2016, propaganda video titled “The Structure of the Khalifah.” In this video, the group presented an organizational chart, much in the style of a “line-and-block” chart often used to depict a wide variety and type of hierarchical organizations. At the top of the Islamic State’s organizational chart is the leader of the group, known as the Caliph, and two main governing bodies (the Delegated Committee and the Shura Council). On the right-hand side of the chart, there is a batch of specific offices and divisions created within both the group’s military

23 Specimens 13M, 13N, and 15S in Aymenn Al-Tamimi’s Archive.

24 At least one document suggests a difference between grievances and complaints, with one handwritten note suggesting that a complaint should have been filed as a grievance. CTC_ComplaintBox_276. Although there may be a process difference, from a substantive perspective they fulfill the same aim for purposes of this report.

and governance structures (*The Dawawin*).²⁵ As presented in this chart and in the video itself, these offices and divisions exist within each of the group's territorial provinces (depicted as *The Wilayat* in the middle of the chart), functioning at a local level.

Although there are also a small number of complaints mailed to higher level officials among the Complaint Box documents,²⁶ most of the complaints take the form of fairly standardized complaint templates, initiated at the local level in different departments and office within the provinces or *Wilayat*.²⁷ A brief discussion of a few of the offices that exist among the 14 entities or ministries that the group created to oversee the day-to-day function of its caliphate may be helpful in further understanding the data presented in this rest of this report.



Figure 3: Still Image from Islamic State Propaganda Video Showing the Group's Structure

The Mujahideen Affairs Office. This is an office located within the Ministry of Soldiery. From documentation gathered for this report as well as previously published work on the Ministry of Soldiery, the Mujahideen Affairs Office appears to be a combination of a traditional human resources department with other functions related to the health and well-being of soldiers. For example, one primary source document shows a form that Islamic State soldiers could submit to the Mujahideen Affairs Office to request a variety of items.²⁸ In the context of this report, this office serves an internal function of dealing with complaints from soldiers toward other soldiers or leaders. It also serves an external role, in some cases addressing complaints levied against soldiers by individuals outside of the

25 Daniel Milton, *Structure of a State: Captured Documents and the Islamic State's Organizational Structure* (West Point, NY: Combating Terrorism Center, 2021).

26 CTC_ComplaintBox_23; CTC_ComplaintBox_8; CTC_ComplaintBox_29. See also a reference from a letter from the General Supervisory Committee that they have received "complaints." Specimen 4X in Aymenn Al-Tamimi's Archive.

27 Although not found in the Complaint Box documents, a previously published document online comes from the "Central office to track grievances." This suggests that some complaints/grievances may have been sent to a higher-level complaints office to begin with, but were then forwarded to the appropriate location. It also opens the possibility that complaints handled locally were tracked or otherwise submitted for record-keeping purposes to a central office. Specimen 321 in Aymenn Al-Tamimi's Archive.

28 Aymenn Jawad Al-Tamimi, "Form for Fighters to Request Items," The Islamic State Archives, March 22, 2024.

Ministry of Soldiery, to include those from civilians living under Islamic State control, and vice versa.²⁹

Embedded Complaint Offices. There is also evidence that within many of the individual departments and ministries, there were specific offices designed to handle complaints related to the subject matter for the office. For example, someone who had a complaint regarding the ownership of a particular piece of property or home would likely be required to file that complaint in the complaint office of the local Real Estate bureau, regardless of whether their complaint involved the interpretation of the local Islamic State land officials or with a former owner.³⁰ Existence of multiple offices that handled complaints is further supported by a list of options noted on some forms for transferring the complaint to another office (see Figure 4).

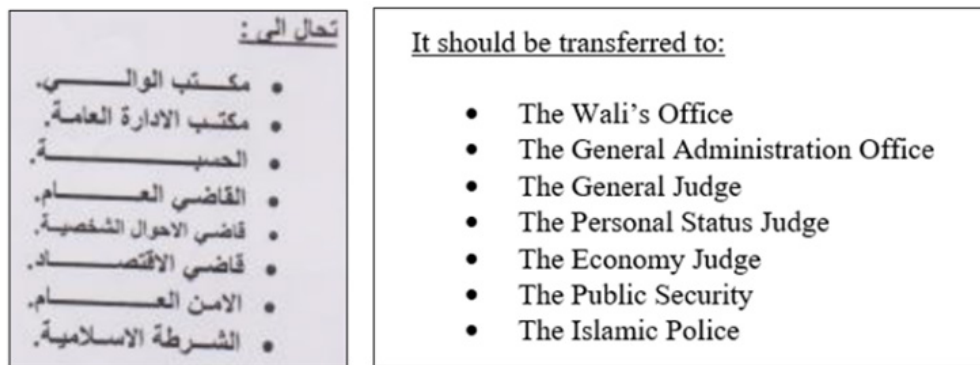


Figure 4: Form Field for Transferring a Complaint³¹

The Provincial Governor's Office. Although not one of the 14 function-specific ministries or offices (*Dawawin*), it is important to remember that the governor (*Wali*) of a province had responsibility over the affairs and decisions made within the geographic territory over which he was in charge. According to the description in the July 2016 video, "The wali refers any serious matters to the Delegated Committee and governs the wilayah's subjects. Justice is thereby secured and the needs of the people are met." Consequently, civilians and members of the group alike could complain directly to the governor in some cases. Primary source evidence not associated with this report corroborates that the provincial governor's office served in some cases as a starting point for complaints.³² The governor's office might then transfer the complaint to another office with a request to be informed of the outcome. Alternatively, the governor's office might initiate an investigation of its own.³³ Although it is hard to provide an exact breakdown of how the provincial governor's office responded to these issues, the former course seemed to be more common than the latter.

The Ministry of Judgment and Grievances. According to the July 2016 video, the Ministry of Judgment and Grievances "is presided over by a sufficient number of judges and is responsible for clarifying and enforcing the shari' rulings in matters of blood, family and marriage-related issues, wealth, and other matters, in addition to judging between the people."³⁴ It is this last responsibility

29 A primary source document previously published online and directed to a battalion of soldiers informs them to take any complaints they have to the "complaints official." It is not clear if that official is assigned to the battalion or is within the Mujahideen Affairs Office, but it does raise the possibility that there was a complaints structure for soldiers within their fighting unit. Specimen 28Q in Aymenn Al-Tamimi's Archive.

30 CTC_ComplaintBox_207

31 CTC_ComplaintBox_391

32 Aymenn Jawad Al-Tamimi, "Request for Employment with the Islamic State," The Islamic State Archives, May 5, 2024.

33 One example of this can be seen in a response to a letter presumably sent out by the provincial governor's office in the course of an investigation of some sort. Aymenn Jawad Al-Tamimi, "Prohibition on Employing an Ex-Member of the Islamic State," The Islamic State Archives, October 30, 2023.

34 "The Structure of the Khalifa," Islamic State video, July 12, 2016.

of “judging between the people” that gives rise to some of the documentation used in this report.³⁵ In the course of their duties, the individual judges within the Ministry of Judgment and Grievances are to hear controversies arising between two parties and render a verdict as to the correct course of action. Thus, an examination of documents from within this Ministry provides one way of looking at the nature of life under the control of the Islamic State by way of the complaints that arose and were documented by the organization.

Although the facts underlying each complaint may have been somewhat unique, there is evidence that common steps in the process after the initial filing included summoning the affected parties and witnesses, conducting interviews, liaising with other relevant Islamic State offices and officials to gather information, rendering a decision in the matter of complaint, and following up to ensure that the resolution was indeed carried out. These steps may have been taken in all cases, but the information contained in these documents do not allow such a broad statement. But what can be said is that there does appear to have been a process in place for handling complaints. Some additional insights regarding some of these steps are noted below.

From examining these documents, it appears that the office in charge of investigating the complaint was generally the office that had responsibility for the issue in question. For example, a complaint regarding property rights and ownership would go to the Bureau of Real Estate for investigation. If someone felt that Islamic State police forces had acted improperly, the complaint would go to the Islamic State police office for the initial investigation and response. Within each of the different entities and departments, there may have been a specific office for complaints. However, in others it appears that it may have been the function of a specific individual. And, on some occasions for reasons not immediately clear in this collection of material, the regular judicial system participated in the resolution of complaints.³⁶ One handwritten note observed that the appropriate starting office for complaints was contingent on whether the complainant was a soldier or citizen, and against which individual or entity the complaint was being filed.³⁷

As one might anticipate with any bureaucratic process, there was evidence in these documents that individuals living within the Islamic State did not always understand which office they should file their complaint in. Indeed, one potential reason for the checklist noted above in Figure 4 may be that the group itself appears to have anticipated that this might be a problem, as several of the documents appear to include a checklist of other offices to which a complaint should be forwarded.³⁸

Regardless of where and how a complaint originated, once it was situated in the correct office, it usually would go through some form of an investigation process. In addition to the original complaint, the offices responsible for investigating the claims also made efforts to gather additional evidence. There are several examples of summons documents, which could be utilized in the complaint process to gather relevant information and testimony from witnesses as well as the accused.³⁹

This process also provided the accused with a chance to respond. At times, it seems that in the cases where the accused was performing an official function or was an office rather than just an individual,

35 While the documentation from the Ministry of Judgment and Grievances utilized most frequently in this report has to do with disputes between two parties, the Ministry itself was responsible for a much wider range of activity. Examples of this appear in the primary source archive maintained by Aymenn Al-Tamimi and can be found at <https://www.aymennjawad.org/2015/01/archive-of-islamic-state-administrative-documents>. To quickly identify the documents on Al-Tamimi’s website pertaining to this specific Ministry, please examine Appendix A of the following CTC report: Milton, *Structure of a State*.

36 CTC_ComplaintBox_226

37 CTC_ComplaintBox_271

38 It may also be the case that this checklist of offices to which the complaint might be forwarded was created because, in this particular province, there was a more streamlined process for the initial intake of the complaints, which were then forwarded to the appropriate office for processing.

39 For examples of summons and witness testimony, see CTC_ComplaintBox_345; CTC_ComplaintBox_356; CTC_ComplaintBox_372.

there was disproportionate weight given to the response. For example, in one case, the complainant felt mistreated by some Hisbah (religious police) personnel. Yet, in authoring a response to reject his claim, all that is cited is the statement of the accused, who denied that they had done anything incorrectly.⁴⁰ It may be that further investigation took place after this point, although the handwritten note seems to indicate that this denial was conveyed back to the accuser without further avenues open to pursue the matter.

After a complaint was investigated and ready for a final decision, the adjudication appears to have depended on the nature of the complaint of the venue in which it was filed. Some cases were handled by judges, but in other cases, the final decision was made by the head of the relevant entity (the leader (*Emir*) of the unit, the provincial governor (*Wali*), or some other official). For example, one of the documents shows that the Office of Real Estate Complaints and Grievances in Al-Furat prepared a decision memorandum of cases that had arisen over a two-week period and were in need of the final verdict of the leader of the Real Estate Center.⁴¹ After the decision was made, it was communicated back to the individual who filed the complaint. These documents do not contain any information regarding the possibility of an appeals process, although there do appear to be a few cases where a complaint was refiled or initiated with another office.

There are nuances to this process, beyond what is covered here, which may be uncovered by further research and examination of the Complaint Box documents. However, the general process outlined above provides a solid understanding regarding the origins of most of the documents in this collection. In what follows, this report examines what can be learned from the documents themselves about the quality of governance in the Islamic State from 2015-2017. It accomplishes this through conveying the stories that were contained in the complaints themselves, grouped into thematic areas that emerged as the authors read through the material.

What Do These Documents Teach Us About Governance in Islamic State Territory?

Now that the nature of these documents and the process that led to their creation has been briefly discussed, this report next addresses the main question of this research: What can we learn from the Complaint Box documents about the challenges and shortfalls of Islamic State governance efforts? This research effort is not intended to be a comprehensive answer to this question, but rather provides a partial and preliminary answer. Regardless of the answers offered here, the hope is that future analyses of the documents being released with this report can be useful to analysts, scholars, and students of the Islamic State, militant groups, and other related subjects. Still, this report does identify several insights that emerge from an examination of these documents.

Beyond the regular issues faced by any bureaucratic entity, several themes emerged from these documents that suggest governance challenges went beyond the regular and banal. Indeed, the Islamic State's governance model seems to have been particularly deficient in ways that highlight the struggle that the group faced in trying to live up to its promised justice, equity, and due process. Taken together, the four themes discussed in this report in more detail below, are as follows:

- Regular Bureaucratic Challenges
- Women and Access to Redress
- Intimidation and Abuse
- Fighting and Flailing

40 CTC_ComplaintBox_152

41 CTC_ComplaintBox_220

Regular Bureaucratic Challenges

The group known as the Islamic State had organizational tendencies that were just a product of the group's post-2014 declaration of a caliphate, but it also relied on organizational experience and learning that had been acquired from previous attempts that its predecessor organizations had made in the area of establishing a bureaucracy.⁴² Such efforts on the part of the group resulted in comparisons between Islamic State institutions and more familiar institutions such as “city hall,” “DMV,” and even “Consumer Protection Office.”⁴³

One of the findings that emerges from these documents is that no matter how much the Islamic State's propaganda tried to distinguish both its governance approach and capability from other types of government in the world, many of those living under the group's authority had to deal with similar challenges and frustrations of bureaucracy as those that any of the citizens of any other governing body would have experienced. In short, the group was unable to escape the fact that establishing and maintaining any sort of bureaucratic structure is difficult. This is apparent in three general bureaucratic frustrations that run through the documents, regardless of the specific theme of the complaint. First, the complaints process itself seems to have been a point of confusion from time to time, despite the fact that in some cases there is evidence that the group attempted to announce the establishment and purpose of complaint offices.⁴⁴ This problem appears to have also been present in the organization and function of other units within the Islamic State such as the Hisbah, which one scholar found to be unnecessarily duplicative and inefficient.⁴⁵ Still, among the large number of governance entities, it might not come as a surprise that Islamic State members and civilians alike are not always clear on where to take a complaint or how to resolve it. As a result, some of the documents in the Complaint Box collection show evidence of confusion regarding the appropriate process through which complaints were to be handled.

In one complaint, a soldier trying to resolve a property issue seems to have a hard time finding anyone who can help him. According to his complaint, he has approached three separate offices about the issue but “everyone says that we have no jurisdiction over it.”⁴⁶

Second, everyone who has visited a bureaucratic entity is familiar with the possibility that their specific issue might not be resolved or that they will need to wait for some time as the issue works its way through the bureaucracy. This seems to be a very common experience even within the territory controlled by the Islamic State. There are several examples of the time lag that can exist within a bureaucracy in the files that make up the Complaint Box documents.

For example, in the case mentioned above of the property issue that was transferred multiple times from office to office, it is also noted by the complainant that this had been going on for five months.⁴⁷ In another case, a female who married two Islamic State soldiers, only for both to be killed in action, experienced a difficult time getting benefits to help her financially cope in the aftermath of her losses. She noted, with some apparent frustration, that it has been three months since her last husband died without resolution of the benefits issue. In part of her complaint, she said, “O our sheikh, by God, I'm

42 Patrick B. Johnson, Jacob N. Shapiro, Howard J. Shatz, Benjamin Bahney, Danielle F. Jung, Patrick Ryan, and Jonathan Wallace, *Foundations of the Islamic State: Management, Money, and Terror in Iraq, 2005–2010* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2016).

43 Aaron Zelin, “The Islamic State of Iraq and Syria Has a Consumer Protection Office,” *Atlantic*, June 13, 2014; Rukmini Callimachi, “The ISIS Files,” *New York Times*, April 4, 2018.

44 Specimen 7G in Aymenn Al-Tamimi's Archive.

45 Aymenn Jawad Al-Tamimi, “The Internal Structure of the Islamic State's Hisba Apparatus,” Middle East Center for Reporting and Analysis, June 1, 2018.

46 CTC_ComplaintBox_131

47 CTC_ComplaintBox_131

so tired of this, and I've been begging this and that just to receive my rights, so please help me."⁴⁸

Third, there is another perspective worth mentioning about regular bureaucratic challenges that appear in a few of the documents. Whereas the examples above discuss the struggles that individuals outside of the bureaucracy (widows, families of martyrs, etc.) had in attempting to interact with the bureaucracy, there are also documents that show that even within the bureaucracy itself, different parts of the Islamic State bureaucracy appear to have lost patience with their counterparts and others while trying to navigate the system. For anyone who has worked in a large organization or a newly developing organization, they are likely familiar with some of the internal challenges highlighted in these examples.

In one document, there is even an indication that frustration existed on the part of those who worked within the bureaucracy with others with whom they nominally work. The document, authored in March 2017, is a response from the Islamic State police center to a complaint sent to them by the provincial governor. The actual issue is not explicitly stated, but it can be inferred from the conversation that someone complained about an issue related to their identification card. In the memo itself, the police center states that it is responding to the complaint with an attached memo (which is not a part of the Complaint Box documents). In other words, the police center is sending the issue back to the provincial governor's office for resolution. In a handwritten note, presumably by someone in the provincial governor's office, is the comment, "The emir of the Public Police,⁴⁹ may God forgive him, could have asked the ID [office] to solve the issue for the sake of time."⁵⁰

Another document that illustrates the bureaucratic inefficiency comes from a complaint filed by an official within the police force against the local leader of the real estate office.⁵¹ According to the complaint, the police official states that they have not been able to get the police force up and running because of a lack of a headquarters building. Not only have they not been able to find an appropriate building, but he notes that "We have been trying for more than a month to communicate with the brother or talk to him on the phone, but we do not find him. Every time, the brothers say to us that he went to the Western Sector, the Eastern [Sector], the Northern [Sector], and so on. We even called three or four times a day but to no avail." In short, it appears that the real estate official is 'ghosting' his colleagues in the police department in a way that prevented the group from implementing police patrols on some level in that locality.

In one final example, an individual who worked in the pharmacy department of a medical facility in Hajin, Syria, realized that they were out of a particular type of medicine. Upon hearing that some was available in the women's hospital, he went to obtain the medicine, but was rebuffed by the female clerk because he did not have a letter from the sector emir. He sought out the clerk's husband to ask, but was told the same thing. After a delay of an unspecified time, he obtained the letter, but noted that the delay may have caused harm to whomever needed the medicine. Moreover, the complainant seemed to suggest that those in charge of dispensing the medicines were not following protocol either and perhaps not even keeping close account of the medicine under their control.⁵²

In short, the Complaint Box documents provide ample evidence that, in addition to the more serious flaws in the governance system described in subsequent sections of this report, there is also significant evidence that the system also suffered from the regular bureaucratic frustrations that will likely be familiar to any of the readers of this report. Unclear processes, long waiting times, and squabbling

48 CTC_ComplaintBox_94

49 The "Public Police" was a rebranding of the "Islamic Police." Thanks to an anonymous reviewer for encouraging the inclusion of this clarification.

50 CTC_ComplaintBox_177

51 CTC_ComplaintBox_49

52 CTC_ComplaintBox_56

bureaucrats engaging in intra-office politics and rivalries all feature within some of the Complaint Box documents. Were these the only shortcomings of the Islamic State's governance system revealed by these documents, one might conclude that there is nothing much to see here. However, in the next section, the authors turn to an issue that appears to be a part of the ideological approach of the Islamic State as it relates to women and as permeated several complaints authored by or submitted on behalf of women living in the so-called caliphate.

Women and Access to Redress

The topic of gender as it relates to the Islamic State has long been a topic of interest, with research conducted on foreigners attracted to the group, rules faced by women in the territory occupied by the group, abuses committed by the group against women who were taken prisoner, and many other avenues of inquiry.⁵³ Among other aspects, and of particular relevance for this report, this research showed that the Islamic State generally regulated and sometimes relegated women's participation in society in ways that prevented women from interacting with many of the institutions of the so-called caliphate on a level that would not be recognizable in many countries around the world, to say nothing of the uneven treatment they received inside Islamic State territory as compared to men. Despite the fact that these efforts largely prevented the outside world from seeing interactions between the group and the people other than what was at most times highly choreographed by the group's propagandists, the Complaint Box documents provide an additional level of detail regarding women inside the Islamic State.⁵⁴

First, there is a specific section in some places for women to approach and seek redress for their complaints. In 16 of the Complaint Box documents, there is a place on the form that shows the complaint is being submitted to a suboffice within the office of the provincial governor in Raqqa referred to as the "Women's Section."⁵⁵ There is little on the form or in these documents to provide any insight into who staffed that office or what particular claims were within the purview of the office. In fact, in at least some of the documents, the woman filing the claim appears to have been directed to take her claim to the court for resolution. One possibility is that for a woman filing a claim, the women's section was the first stop, but this is not clear from the documents, especially given that there are other complaints made by women in these documents that do not appear to be from within a "Women's Section."⁵⁶ In one example in al-Khayr in 2017, a woman who lived in a three-unit housing complex objected to the fact that one of the housing units had been given to men.⁵⁷ The nature of the complex allowed the male occupants to have views into the homes of the female occupants, something that the female complainant did not think was permissible. This complaint appears to have originated within the real estate bureaucracy.

Even though the existence of a specific suboffice for issues related to women might be taken to show some level of awareness by Islamic State officials about the need to consider issues related to women separately, there is also a practicality in the existence of a separate office given the group's rigorous adherence to rules preventing genders from interacting and an overarching attempt to keep tight

53 Joana Cook and Gina Vale, "From Daesh to 'Diaspora' II: The Challenges Posed by Women and Minors After the Fall of the Caliphate," *CTC Sentinel* 12:6 (2019): pp. 36-45; Haroro Ingram, Craig Whiteside, and Charlie Winter, *The ISIS Reader: Milestone Texts of the Islamic State Movement* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020), Chapter 9; Gina Vale, "Piety Is in the Eye of the Bureaucrat: The Islamic State's Strategy of Civilian Control," *CTC Sentinel* 13:1 (2020): pp. 34-42; Devorah Margolin and Joana Cook, *The Agency and Roles of Foreign Women in ISIS* (Washington, D.C.: Center for Justice and Accountability, 2023).

54 The ISIS Files Project uncovered documents showing a similar interaction between women and the legal apparatus created by the Islamic State. Devorah Margolin and Charlie Winter, *Women in the Islamic State: Victimization, Support, Collaboration, and Acquiescence* (Washington, D.C.: George Washington University, 2021).

55 For example, see CTC_ComplaintBox_147.

56 Another possibility is that the Women's Section was specific to the bureaucratic structure of Islamic State in Raqqa.

57 CTC_ComplaintBox_229

control on the activities and opportunities afforded to women. Other examples of this include separate efforts for preaching based on gender, as well as the opening of a library in territory occupied by the group, but restricting access for women to one day a week (Figure 5).



Figure 5: Library Sign from Al-Khayr with Separate Hours for Women

Second, there is clear evidence of downplaying and undermining the role of women in these documents across many different settings. In one document, a woman notes that she and her family were living in a rented house after selling their home, only to have two individuals show up and force them to leave, with the backing of the Hisbah. When a Hisbah member threatened to hit the complainant and she stood up for herself, she and others with her were arrested.⁵⁸ This complaint, filed in Raqqa, is very similar to another one that originated in Ninawa. In the latter document, a woman filed a complaint after her home was raided on suspicion of cigarette possession. During the raid, the women were not allowed to cover themselves properly, a security officer beat her husband, and the traumatic experience caused her 12-year-old daughter to pass out from fear.⁵⁹ When she tried to question the manner in which the Hisbah were carrying out their mission, they told her to be silent and threatened to call out the female Hisbah members to deal with her. As it turns out, raids on homes by Islamic State security forces in which females are not protected or treated with dignity occurred at least two other times in these documents.⁶⁰

The issues faced by women living under Islamic State rule were not limited to raids by local police or encounters on the street with the more religiously focused Hisbah.⁶¹ In Islamic State territory, women were also responsible in some cases for fending for their families, although the support system did not always seem to work smoothly. Women complained about losing benefits designed to provide food or housing, often without any explanation. In one case, a mother of six, two of whom had severe burns, had her charitable benefit card (*zakat*) taken away and, despite requesting its return, appears

58 CTC_ComplaintBox_118

59 CTC_ComplaintBox_303

60 CTC_ComplaintBox_367; CTC_ComplaintBox_359

61 CTC_ComplaintBox_93; CTC_ComplaintBox_279

to have been left waiting and wondering if any resolution would come.⁶² In another case, a woman claimed her martyr's benefits card was given to someone else, and her efforts to get it back through official channels resulted in ridicule, threats, and ultimately no action.⁶³ As noted in this last example, obtaining benefits from the group due to poverty was not the only benefit for which women often had to advocate. They were also owed benefits if their spouse was an Islamic State member and died in combat. In one case, a 29-year-old widowed mother of a small girl said that her home was leaking, but the local office for the families of martyrs told her that it could not help because they did not have a maintenance section.⁶⁴ Her complaint seems to indicate that the Martyr's office had not treated her well in the past, and according to the handwritten note on the complaint form, it seems that her complaint fell on sympathetic ears, with the response being that urgent investigation was needed. Finally, in Raqqa, a complaint emerged from a hospital that noted equipment such as gloves were being reused for women's gynecological exams and that disease was spreading in that hospital.⁶⁵ This document did not contain any resolution of the complaint.

Another case, from Raqqa in late 2016, presented a widowed mother with a young child.⁶⁶ The woman's husband had given his life in the service of the Islamic State, but from the complaint, it appears the suffering of his widow was not a pressing issue, at least to those who initially heard it. According to her complaint, the woman and her child lived in a property that had some serious maintenance issues that resulted in leaking from "all sides" of the home. She claimed that all of their clothing was wet and that the house was "filled with water." Yet, her appeals to the local Martyr's Center did not yield any results and she felt poorly treated by them. She also tried to preempt the possible solution of being sent to a guesthouse by noting that it would not be good for her mental well-being. In sum, the widow of an Islamic State member and her young child were wet and cold in December and the local office in charge of helping her did not seem to care. It cannot be said that her plight did not evoke any support, as the handwritten notes on the document, presumably from the provincial governor, seem to suggest the need for it to be urgently dealt with, but it seems a distinct possibility that her initial efforts failed because she was a woman in a male-dominated bureaucracy.

At least one anecdote shows that it was not just widows who could be ignored, but even women who held valuable skills in high demand in the group's territory as well. In one undated complaint sent directly to the provincial governor in Raqqa, a female doctor raised concerning allegations regarding her interactions with the leader of the hospital.⁶⁷ She was pregnant, but her official leave had not been approved, so even though she was late in her pregnancy and not feeling well, she continued to perform c-sections for other women. Eventually, she was unable to work. The leader of the hospital imprisoned her husband because of her absence from work. Then, after delivery of her own child through a c-section, she was told to return to work less than a month later. She noted that her child was small and she needed to be close by to feed him, to no avail. There is no resolution noted, but it seems unlikely to have been favorable given that the complaint was forwarded to the leader of the hospital for response!

Although there are more specific examples in these documents, overall they illustrate a tension: at once recognizing the need to treat women differently while also struggling to do so in a way consistent with the group's broader ideologically informed limitations on the role of women. Ultimately, even though

62 CTC_ComplaintBox_154. There are also other cases of women advocating for themselves and their families due to either having benefits removed or are waiting for benefits to be given. CTC_ComplaintBox_162; CTC_ComplaintBox_197; CTC_ComplaintBox_59; CTC_ComplaintBox_83; CTC_ComplaintBox_94; CTC_ComplaintBox_66; CTC_ComplaintBox_127.

63 CTC_ComplaintBox_158

64 CTC_ComplaintBox_71

65 CTC_ComplaintBox_111

66 CTC_ComplaintBox_71

67 CTC_ComplaintBox_104

allowing complaints may be seen by some as a sign of acceptance of women in the group's self-declared caliphate, these documents show that women still faced uphill odds in a system that, although nominally giving them an avenue to address complaints, did not appear in many cases to be effective at doing so. This is perhaps best illustrated by a handwritten comment on one of the complaint forms, presumably from an official in charge of investigating the complaint. The substance of the complaint was that a 24-year-old divorced single mother was subjected to a raid due to an issue raised by her ex-husband.⁶⁸ During the raid, the security forces did not give her any time to put on proper clothing, even though she requested it. She closed her complaint by asking for accountability for those who did not honor her desire to remain modest. The first handwritten note says that the complaint should be sent to the leader of the police station. Another note, possibly from the police station, states that "We have not wronged the sister. She should fear God."

There is little doubt that women in the Islamic State, whether supportive of the organization or merely living in territory under its control, found themselves in a position where their activities were heavily prescribed. These documents have further demonstrated some specific ways in which they may have struggled to address their challenges and more generally highlighted the fact that the people and the structure in which they operated tended to minimize or otherwise downplay their concerns. And, as noted above, women also featured from time to time as victims of physical violence by security forces. The next section tackles this issue more generally and explores what the Complaint Box documents reveal about the excesses of security services in their efforts to police the population.

Intimidation and Abuse

Among the wide array of reasons why some individuals supported or joined groups such as the Islamic State were the widespread atrocities committed by the Syrian regime.⁶⁹ Not just limited to what happened on the battlefield, the brutal actions of Assad's security forces and secret police served to many as an example of unchecked power of the worst kind, that which led to physical injury and death. The idea of being the defender of those who were being abused became one of the issues the Islamic State touted in its propaganda.⁷⁰ Highlighting its military and governance exploits was part of the way through which the group emphasized that it not only could push back, but replace, those who harmed Muslims.

The Complaint Box documents show this narrative was not erased when the Islamic State swept into power. Instead, it remained and was demonstrated through two primary avenues, one which was familiar to those who had faced oppression under old regimes and another which was unique to the ideological underpinnings of the Islamic State. The first is the familiar song of any regime concerned with law, order, and security, but which does not have well developed processes for ensuring that those goals are achieved in balance and without excess on the part of security services. The second avenue is that which creates intimidation and abuse wrapped in the shroud of religious legitimacy.

Among the first responsibilities of any governing entity is the establishment of security for the governed, providing a sense of order and structure in which people can live their lives without unreasonable fear of their physical safety being threatened by other people. Indeed, the ability of many militant groups to establish themselves as semi-legitimate governing forces, whether in Somalia or Afghanistan, has

68 CTC_ComplaintBox_149

69 Vera Mironova, Loubna Mrie, and Sam Whitt, "The Motivations of Syrian Islamist Fighters," *CTC Sentinel* 7:10 (2014): pp. 15-17; Anne Speckhard and Molly Ellenberg, "The effects of Assad's atrocities and the call to foreign fighters to come to Syria on the rise and fall of the ISIS Caliphate," *Behavioral Sciences of Terrorism and Political Aggression* 14:2 (2022): pp. 169-185.

70 Winter, *The Virtual 'Caliphate'*; Daniel Milton, *Communication Breakdown: Unraveling the Islamic State's Media Efforts* (West Point, NY: Combating Terrorism Center, 2016).

largely been attributed to their ability to provide security.⁷¹ The provision of security, of course, does not justify the abuses and oppression that many of these same groups also exert. The relevant observation here is that the provision of traditional security is an important function in many weak states or areas.

The Islamic State also made the provision of security a large part of its early governing efforts. As other scholars have noted, this was of necessity: Not only did the group's external legitimacy hinge to a certain extent on fulfilling the traditional functions of statehood, but it faced the internal pressure of needing to provide local citizens with order and structure critical to preventing chaos, anarchy, and public backlash.⁷² And so, both on the ground and online in its propaganda, Islamic State police forces began to appear (see Figure 6).



Figure 6: Islamic State Police Featured in Issue #2 of Islamic State Report

Within the Complaint Box documents, however, one finds some evidence that the police forces may have overstepped their bounds from time to time in their effort to carry out these security functions.

Checkpoints at which security personnel search vehicles, identification, and people for any contraband or other violations are common in many societies, and Islamic State-governed territory and cities are no exception. But they also present an opportunity for abuse. In one document, sent in early 2017 from the provincial governor's office in Raqqa to the leader in charge of one area of the city (referred to as the Northern Sector), the governor's office notes that it has received a complaint regarding the conduct of individuals working at the checkpoints toward civilians (non-Islamic State members) that is engendering unfavorable feelings.⁷³ In another checkpoint incident, a taxi driver quickly became the target of the ire of the security forces when they asked to search the mobile phones of those in his cab. The taxi driver tried to ascertain some information from his passenger about what might be on the phones, but this frustrated the security personnel, who apparently felt that the taxi driver was stepping out of his lane. This resulted in the taxi driver being spit on, physically abused, and incarcerated.⁷⁴ According to both the taxi driver and the passenger (who submitted a witness statement), insult was added to real injury when the taxi driver was asked to apologize despite having been the target of aggression.

One might anticipate some level of unfavorable interactions to occur at security checkpoints, which by design are set up to enforce laws in public and deter bad behavior. However, individuals might expect to be more protected against hostile interactions with security services within their own private homes and residences. There is evidence within these documents that even the private homes of individuals living within Islamic State territory served as a forum for hostile interactions with security services.

71 Cedric Barnes and Harun Hassan, "The Rise and Fall of Mogadishu's Islamic Courts," *Journal of Eastern African Studies* 1:2 (2007): pp. 151-160; Oscar Gakuo Mwangi, "The Union of Islamic Courts and security governance in Somalia," *African Security Review* 19:1 (2010): pp. 88-94; Niels Terpstra, "Rebel governance, rebel legitimacy, and external intervention: assessing three phases of Taliban rule in Afghanistan," *Small Wars & Insurgencies* 31:6 (2020): pp. 1,143-1,173.

72 Beatrice de Graaf and Ahmet S. Yayla, *Policing as Rebel Governance: The Islamic State Police* (Washington, D.C.: George Washington University Program on Extremism, 2021).

73 CTC_ComplaintBox_187

74 CTC_ComplaintBox_363

One interesting document comes from an August 2015 complaint in the province of Ninawa.⁷⁵ Several Islamic State members signed on as supporters of the complaint, which focused on the actions of one police officer, who seemed to terrorize the neighborhood by breaking into homes, at times by first accessing the roof and then dropping in. He also seemed prone to insulting people and holding them without charge in a prison before pushing them to other entities such as the Hisbah. The final resolution of this case is not known, but a sticky note with an update indicated that the alleged rogue police officer had been summoned and, unsurprisingly, denied the charges. In another complaint, authored by a 70-year-old woman, she claims that police entered her home looking for one son who owed a debt (who was not home), but decided to haul her other two sons off to prison.⁷⁶ The police personnel also allegedly shoved a gun into the woman's face, whose complaint seemed to express incredulity that the police officers would conduct themselves in such a matter. It is unknown if her sons were eventually released.

Beyond checkpoints and homes, the Complaint Box documents provide many other instances where run-ins with police forces occurred. In one, a man who worked for the Islamic State in manufacturing was traveling with two friends when they were approached by Islamic State police.⁷⁷ The officers frisked them and began screaming at them, seemingly for no reason, even upon finding out that one was an Islamic State member. In fact, this only seemed to enrage the officer further, who claimed that he could conduct searches whenever and wherever he wanted. For another individual, shooting his weapon into the air at a wedding resulted in a shove from an Islamic State police officer.⁷⁸ The officer then allegedly began insulting the man, referring to him as a dog and saying that he did not care if the man complained to the caliph himself. He denied the allegations when called to account. One final example comes from a report written by an individual who traveled around the Islamic State's Syrian territories.⁷⁹ In addition to noting a number of problems he saw, including corruption and disregard for the group's rules, he noted his frustration for not being able to correct the behavior of a security official in Al-Furat who supported the "arresting the migrants from the streets, and hitting, torturing, and insulting them for no reason."

In addition to the regular demands placed on any governing entity to provide security, the Islamic State's religious ideology led it to create a security entity focused on the implementation of religious rules and regulations. This entity, known as the Hisbah, became responsible for what some scholars identified as four separate types of policing: thought, body, spiritual, and market.⁸⁰ Among numerous responsibilities, the Hisbah was responsible for issuing travel permits,⁸¹ monitoring public adherence to regulations related to sexuality and gender, prohibiting and punishing smoking, and maintaining standards of grooming.⁸² Hisbah officers regularly patrolled the streets, interviewed citizens and business owners alike, and focused their attention on encouraging correct behavior. These types of interactions would have put them in a position to regularly interact with members and civilians alike, but in a context that many of those being governed would have likely preferred to avoid. Reports from individuals living within Islamic-State controlled territory corroborate this, suggesting that

75 CTC_ComplaintBox_329

76 CTC_ComplaintBox_123

77 CTC_ComplaintBox_260

78 CTC_ComplaintBox_338

79 CTC_ComplaintBox_8

80 Asaad Almoammad and Clemens Holzgruber, *Moral Dominance: Policing Minds, Spirits, Bodies, and Markets* (Washington, D.C.: George Washington University Program on Extremism, 2021).

81 Even though the primary source documentation showed that Hisbah played some role in issuing travel permits, it should also be noted that appears to be some inconsistency on this point. Another piece of primary source documentation showed that, at least in one province of the Islamic State, there was a travel office within the migration (*hijra*) ministry. Aymenn Jawad Al-Tamimi, "Travel Card from Wilayat al-Khayr," The Islamic State Archives, October 27, 2023.

82 Ibid.

Hisbah members “roam around 24 hours a day ... terrorizing, scaring, forcing” those that live in their cities.⁸³ According to a number of Complaint Box documents, these interactions also created numerous opportunities for unfavorable experiences that were filled with tension and, in some cases, carried to excess.



Figure 7: Administering Lashes as Punishment for Violations

Something as regular and banal as walking down the street or tending to a business was the beginning of several complaints against the Hisbah. For a trio of men outside on a Friday when the Hisbah said they should have been at prayer, the result was arrest.⁸⁴ They protested that their motorcycle needed to be secured, but their request was denied and off to jail they went. Later, when released, they found that their motorcycle had been stolen. When they went back to complain to a Hisbah official, he had them imprisoned again. For a shop owner in Ninawa province, his trouble started when a patron lit up a cigarette as he exited the shop.⁸⁵ Unfortunately for the shop owner, the next person who entered the shop appears to have been a Hisbah official. He demanded the offending cigarettes and beat the shop owner when he stated that he did not smoke. Finally, a response by the Hisbah office to a complaint suggests a chaotic scene when Hisbah members on patrol identified three women doing something they should not have been.⁸⁶ When the Hisbah attempted to arrest the women, a male bystander appears to have intervened and told the women to go home. This enraged the Hisbah there, who physically assaulted the man and, in their own words, “beat him to shut him up.” The resolution of the complaint and response is not known, but the story does emphasize the dangers of crossing the Hisbah.

On the issue of gender, the Hisbah seem to have thought themselves above the rules on the appropriate treatment of women. In one case, they chased a teenage boy who had not attended prayer.⁸⁷ The boy entered a home where a woman and her children were present, presumably seeking to hide. When the Hisbah arrived, they not only arrested the child, but hit the woman and spoke harshly to her as well.

83 Alexander Smith and Ghazi Balkiz, “What Life Is Like Inside ISIS’ Capital City of Raqqa, Syria,” NBC News, September 25, 2014.

84 CTC_ComplaintBox_183

85 CTC_ComplaintBox_264

86 CTC_ComplaintBox_193

87 CTC_ComplaintBox_75

In another incident, the Hisbah came to a house looking to arrest an individual.⁸⁸ That individual's sister, an Islamic State martyr's widow, offered verbal support for her sibling and proclaimed his innocence. This did not sit well with the Hisbah official, who responded, "Be quiet, or I should hit you with the wireless device and knock you down ... you impudent woman." A Hisbah official also allegedly tried to remove this same woman's veil from her face. Such disregard and even contempt for women speaking out was even more apparent in a raid by the Hisbah on a house in search of cigarettes.⁸⁹ The complaint (described earlier), generated by the mother and wife in the home, noted that her husband was beaten, her 12-year-old daughter passed out due to the stress of the incident, and ultimately the Hisbah arrested her husband and sons. Her objection to one of the Hisbah officials present during the raid resulted in a harsh response: "Shut up or I'll call the female Hisbah for you."

In some of the Complaint Box documents related to the Hisbah, it seems at times that the unit considers itself to be above the law and not to be bound by it. For example, in one case they arrested three individuals for fighting, but released two who were affiliated with the Islamic State.⁹⁰ The third individual, also affiliated but apparently unknown to the Hisbah official, almost received lashes but was imprisoned instead. In the complaint filed by this third individual, he asked, "Is this his way of discriminating between State brothers and common Muslims? He lets the State brothers go free and imprisons common Muslims." In another case, an individual who either is Hisbah or closely aligned with them acts with disregard toward locals, interacts inappropriately with women, and conducts searches of communications devices.⁹¹ When the author of the complaint went to the Hisbah to complain, they did not seem concerned by it at all, even though the author was sure that this behavior was damaging the group's reputation. Another complaint echoed this sentiment of concern regarding public opinion due to the Hisbah's actions.⁹² The final example of this came from a man whose family lived next to a Hisbah official.⁹³ Apparently the official and his son liked to spend a lot of time on their roof, but this gave them a view into their neighbor's home and property, which made the residents uncomfortable because it might allow them to see the female occupants uncovered while doing work or relaxing in the home. When the neighbor approached them about spending less time on the roof, presumably to avoid seeing the women in his family, the official and his son reacted with rage and physical violence. Even when the matter was escalated to the regular police, the Hisbah official continued to stand his ground, saying, "I will stand at the window and watch the house and whoever complains, I will hold him accountable and punish him."

In sum, these examples, through the lens of both civilians living within the Islamic State as well as members of the group, show that the security apparatus created by the group was not without its own struggles and challenges. The collection of Complaint Box documents provides many additional examples of entitlement, overreach, and in some cases, brutality by the entities responsible for providing both physical security and religious order within the territories control by the Islamic State.

The Bureaucratic Struggles of the Battlefield

Despite all that it may be known for, the Islamic State is first and foremost a fighting organization. The very first iteration of the organization gained its notoriety on the battlefields of Iraq against American troops responding to the rising insurgency in 2003-2004, while later evolutions of the group swept across large swathes of Iraq and Syria, defeating local governments and other insurgent

88 CTC_ComplaintBox_195

89 CTC_ComplaintBox_303

90 CTC_ComplaintBox_198

91 CTC_ComplaintBox_144

92 CTC_ComplaintBox_156

93 CTC_ComplaintBox_78

movements alike on the battlefield—and in some cases, frightening them away before the fighting had even begun.⁹⁴

But even the group’s fighting successes on the frontlines required a bureaucracy behind it. One cannot fight battles without plans, weapons, and soldiers, and each of those components must be resourced, cultivated, and directed. Soldiers have to be recruited before they can be trained, and they have trained before they become part of a unit (see Figure 8). And, even once the group has deployed its soldiers, maintaining morale among them can be difficult if they do not have their needs—and for some, those of their family members—and taken care of. And the Complaint Box documents show that, in some cases, there were serious issues at each point in the bureaucracy designed to support and implement the military vision of the Islamic State. Complaints in this realm fall into two general categories.



Figure 8: Islamic State Recruits in Training Camp

First, there are complaints that highlight the nature of the bureaucratic challenges facing the Islamic State when it came to fielding a fighting force. These complaints ranged from issues that impacted single individuals to larger groups. In the former category, one document came from an individual whose half-brother had joined the group, made it through training camp, and, as far as his family knew, disappeared.⁹⁵ They had not heard from him in over two weeks. This scene was repeated for another family, except in this case, it had been several months since they had seen or heard from their family member, asking “Is he dead or alive? Where is he?”⁹⁶ Three handwritten notes later, it appears that the administrators working this case still do not know the answer to the question. For another soldier, his complaint was that he has been asked to transfer from one assignment to another, but then had been asked to stay for a little bit longer, but as a result he never received his monthly stipend.⁹⁷

In some cases, several complaints also appear to highlight what can only be described generally as

94 Muhammad al-`Ubaydi, Nelly Lahoud, Daniel Milton, and Bryan Price, *The Group That Calls Itself a State: Understanding the Evolution and Challenges of the Islamic State* (West Point, NY: Combating Terrorism Center, 2014).

95 CTC_ComplaintBox_324

96 CTC_ComplaintBox_313

97 CTC_ComplaintBox_5. This fighter was not alone in having issues receiving his pay. Other complaints noted this issue as well. CTC_ComplaintBox_19; CTC_ComplaintBox_25.

personnel issues. The group needed fighters but, according to several complaints, seemed to stumble in several instances in actually attempting to place the right people in the right positions so that they could fight for the group. And then, at times, the complaints make it clear that tracking those soldiers who transferred to new locations or died in action created complications for the group and those who were a part of it.

In 2016, an individual from Homs who worked in the security forces for the Islamic State traveled to Raqqa with a few others in order to fight, in response to a call from Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi.⁹⁸ However, a month later, they were still sitting around in Raqqa waiting to be sent to fight. The unit at which they arrived apparently told them to go home, then said that they lost the transfer memo for the soldiers. The prospective soldiers then appealed to the provincial governor, but did not hear anything back. This led them to file a complaint in order to force the issue to be able to fight.

In one undated complaint, an individual soldier said that he chose to go to Iraq to join Islamic State fighters there, but quickly became disenchanted by what he saw there. Thus, he wanted to return to Syria. He received an assignment upon explaining his return from Iraq, but later was denied registration and compensation because his original registration was in Iraq. It also seems that, on some level, his unit in Iraq may have suspected him of desertion. He argues that “I long for the ribat [maintaining watch on the frontier to defend the Islamic State], and if I wanted to desert, I have enough money to do so, but I would not do that.”⁹⁹ But, his situation seems to be unresolved. And he notes that whatever is happening in Iraq is bad enough to make him see joining the enemies of the Islamic State and being condemned in the world to come as preferable to going back to Iraq.

In late 2016, the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) and coalition partners began a campaign against Raqqa, an important city in Syria controlled by the Islamic State since early 2014.¹⁰⁰ Coming nearly at the same time as the campaign to liberate Mosul, Iraq, from Islamic State control, the campaign against Raqqa created a need within the Islamic State for more soldiers and frontline fighters. As revealed in these documents, it appears that the military wing of the group sought additional personnel from within the non-military Islamic State entities. The leader of the Office of Public Relations and Tribes decided to hold a raffle to determine who would be sent to the frontline to serve. The need for additional soldiers and the process to fill that need became the genesis for a complaint, as the individual chosen by the drawing was a 50-year-old male with diabetes, heart problems, and other health challenges.¹⁰¹ With his complain, he included copies of his medical reports (not included in the batch of material being released). Although perhaps not their standard process for selecting soldiers, there still appeared to be flaws in the system even in the exigent circumstances of late 2016.

The challenge of getting the right soldiers to the frontlines also meant that the Islamic State bureaucracy had to deal with reluctant soldiers or individuals who realized that being placed on the frontlines had a high probability of resulting in death. In 2017, one memo that responds to a complaint from a soldier highlights an individual seeking to be very crafty in avoiding the fight combined with a bureaucracy that could not seem to quite figure out which type of individual they were dealing with.¹⁰² It seems a potential soldier was placed into a new battalion when some sort of reorganization took place and he did not like his new assignment. So, he requested to be reassigned, but the reasoning seemed suspect to those writing the response; they thought he was evading military service. And this appears to begin a back-and-forth process where the individual is either being shuffled from one entity (the provincial governor’s office and the battalion headquarters) to the next or simply playing one entity off the other.

98 CTC_ComplaintBox_134

99 CTC_ComplaintBox_70

100 Hassan Hassan, “The Battle for Raqqa and the Challenges after Liberation,” *CTC Sentinel* 10:6 (2017): pp. 1-10.

101 CTC_ComplaintBox_125

102 CTC_ComplaintBox_159

The frustration of whomever is authoring the response to the complaint is apparent, as they end their memo by saying, “The brother was a deserter before these letters and before he was re-sorted, and if he was keen on this religion, he would have remained in the battalion.”

Also in 2017, at least one complaint suggests that the confusion regarding soldiers being sent to battalions amid a reorganization of the group’s military structure was not limited to deserters. Even those who wanted to fulfill what they saw as their obligation to fight ran into roadblocks. One individual, who had worked in a police unit, received orders to go to a newly formed battalion.¹⁰³ Upon arriving, he asked to go to his position, but received no response. He followed up and was told he has been transferred again. The complainant then notes that he sought out the leader of the sector to ask questions, but unfortunately, the document is cutoff and the rest of the details of the conversation are not recorded.

In some cases, the issue of correctly tracking military personnel seems to have outlived some of the actual soldiers. As is true in many organizations (terrorist, militant, or otherwise), soldiers killed in combat often receive benefits that pass along to their family members. In the context of jihadi organizations, those payments are referred to as “martyr” payments. In the Complaint Box documents, the Islamic State seems to have had issues arise related to these martyr payments. In one case, the families of at least two fighters complained about not receiving their payments, which appears to have led to an investigation as to the reason for this outcome. A memo from one entity appears to transfer responsibility for the case to another entity, observing that it seems that paperwork had not been processed correctly.¹⁰⁴ Additionally, as noted above, the families of dead Islamic State fighters often had to file complaints due to missing benefit payments.

The second category of complaint has to do with documents highlighting much more challenging issues related to the Islamic State’s warfighting efforts. Indeed, within several complaints there are discussions of significant challenges and frustrations related to war strategy, preparation, execution, and the distribution of war spoils. The paragraphs that follow provide brief discussions of some of these examples.

As the Islamic State attracted large numbers of individuals, both local and foreign, to join its group in the early days of the caliphate, many of those who came had to enter military training camps in order to learn how to use weapons and operate within the group’s hierarchy, among other requirements.¹⁰⁵ Images of Islamic State members in training camps, doing everything from physical education to weapons training to graduation, were a frequent presence in the group’s propaganda. But there may have been a less hospitable side to some of these training camps. Although very few complaints focused on training camps, the few that do suggest the possibility that problems ranged from the minor to the major. In one complaint, of which only a small part is unredacted, the complainant notes that administrators in the camp took his cell phone and it would not be returned until training had been completed.¹⁰⁶ Unfortunately for another training camp attendee, the completion of camp was a moving target. In his complaint, he noted that his training camp leader made the entire class redo training because seven of the 37 students failed.¹⁰⁷ To make matters worse, the training camp leader seemed to impose some harsh conditions on his trainees. In his own words, the complainant stated that “he

103 CTC_ComplaintBox_141

104 CTC_ComplaintBox_31

105 For documentary evidence of the existence and length of the training camps, see Daniel Milton, Julia Lodoen, Ryan O’Farrell, and Seth Loertscher, “Newly Released ISIS Files: Learning from the Islamic State’s Long-Version Personnel Form,” *CTC Sentinel* 12:9 (2019): pp. 15-20. For a description of the types of activities that may have happened in Islamic State training camps, see Hassan Hassan, “The secret world of Isis training camps – ruled by sacred texts and the sword,” *Guardian*, January 24, 2015.

106 CTC_ComplaintBox_202

107 CTC_ComplaintBox_132

imprisoned us in a small cell where I could not sleep as we used to pee and pray in the same place. He used to beat us for no reason, and he kept the food outside for several days until it was spoiled and mold appeared on it, then we ate it.”

In 2015, several media outlets covered a story in which U.S. military personnel, monitoring Islamic State social media feeds, came across an image posted by an Islamic State soldier in front of an important military building. As a result of seeing this perfect example of poor operational security among Islamic State personnel, the U.S. military carried out an airstrike that destroyed the building.¹⁰⁸ Given the large number of airstrikes carried out over the course of the campaign, it comes as no surprise that operational security was an important issue.¹⁰⁹ Yet, evidence emerges from Complaint Box documents suggesting that the group still struggled to educate its soldiers on this topic.

In one case, an Islamic State military medic filed a complaint against the leader of a security unit in a neighborhood in Raqqa.¹¹⁰ The medic alleged that the leader and his soldiers publicly displayed their weapons and brought prisoners in and out of the building. They did this, apparently without concern for the possibility that drones could be used to pinpoint the location of the headquarters and bring an airstrike down upon the building. So, the medic claims, he warned them to be more discrete in the actions, including in the parking of their vehicles. If they did not have concern for their own welfare, the medic noted that their actions imperiled the lives of the many civilians who occupied the same building, including families of other Islamic State members.

There is also a body of complaints that, although not fitting into any specific category, paint a fairly stark picture of Islamic State soldiers as more akin to Gomer Pyle than Rambo. For example, in one, a soldier notes that he lost his weapon with no apparent excuse.¹¹¹ In another, a leader of a group of “undisciplined soldiers” complains about three subordinates that he would like to transfer for various reasons, including not caring about the work of the unit or causing everyone who interacted with a particular soldier to complain.¹¹² The author of the document runs into one of his problem soldiers and, probably with some exasperation, asks, “Haven’t you been transferred yet?”

Trivial challenges aside, there is also evidence in the Complaint Box documents of the darker side of serving inside the Islamic State as a soldier.¹¹³ For any soldier in any fighting force, knowing that they will be taken care of in the event they are wounded is an important issue. Yet, as noted above in several examples, payments to families of martyrs often appeared to be lost or hard to secure. Other documents show that wounded soldiers may have struggled as well. In one document, an unknown author highlighted six complaints he had been told by individuals who were at a “recovery facility,” presumably to recuperate from combat injuries.¹¹⁴ But their recovery seemed to be inhibited in part by the poor care they received, which included little food, several patients being forced to share a single water bottle, and being told by the staff at the facility that there was not any cold water available even though the staff used the refrigerator to cool their water before taking it home.

Leadership also appears to be an issue, as several documents suggest that lower-level soldiers often found themselves at the mercy of leaders who did not seem to lead particularly well. For one soldier,

108 Walbert Castillo, “Air Force intel uses ISIS ‘moron’ post to track fighters,” CNN, June 5, 2015.

109 According to a U.S. Department of Defense website for Operation Inherent Resolve, the U.S. military carried out nearly 25,000 airstrikes as of August 9, 2017, which is right around the time when some of the Complaint Box documents were authored. See <https://dod.defense.gov/OIR/>

110 CTC_ComplaintBox_133

111 CTC_ComplaintBox_60

112 CTC_ComplaintBox_47

113 The challenges of being a soldier identified in the Complaint Box documents are not unheard of. In a two-part series interviewing a former member of the Islamic State’s security bureau published by a media organization engaged in an ideological battle within the group, the entire second part focused exclusively on military mismanagement. Aymenn Jawad Al-Tamimi, “Opposition to Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi: The Testimony of a Former Amni (II),” aymennjawad.org, September 29, 2019.

114 CTC_ComplaintBox_7

showing up without paperwork that the administrator had expected led to an altercation in which the administrator threatened to have him imprisoned.¹¹⁵ In the case of one soldier, the local provincial governor ordered his home seized for reasons not clear in the complaint.¹¹⁶ This soldier then directly complained to the governor, arguing that civilians were treated better than soldiers, and that it appears that “carrying a rifle has become a crime in our beloved State.” As if to prove the soldier’s point, however, the handwritten response of the governor on the complaint was for the soldier to be arrested and handed over to another unit. In another document, a soldier seeking to obtain food in preparation for fasting approached his leader.¹¹⁷ His leader apparently took his questions regarding food as a sign of insubordination and proceeded to whip him and stated, “I’ll cut you in half.”

Soldiers suffering under bad leadership was not unique to the experiences of those highlighted above.¹¹⁸ In one of the few documents from Yemen, a summary of the results of an investigation into complaints by 17 soldiers against their leader highlighted a range of challenges.¹¹⁹ Among others, they complain about inadequate medical supplies, insufficient ammunition, drinking water that poisons those who drink it, and a lack of responsiveness to complaints. In the investigative response, the author defends the beleaguered leader by noting that the problems they are facing are common to many other fighting units in the area—although that may not have been of comfort to the complainants. Interestingly, the investigating officer noted that several of the initial 17 complainants appeared satisfied with the answers after the investigation was over, suggesting that the process worked, at least for those satisfied with the answers. This apparently did not settle all the issues, as evidenced by an even longer statement issued by the same author of the first investigation in which he responds to some who appear to be critical of the process and outcome.¹²⁰

Within these documents, one of them stands out in highlighting the travails of soldiers grappling with leadership deficiencies. It contains vivid stories and examples, enhancing the credibility of the overall critiques being made. The individual who authored it has well-articulated concerns, and it is possible that he was writing at the behest of others or as part of an official investigation. It is not possible to summarize all that it discusses here, but even the wavetops provide a sense of the leadership issues identified. It emerges from within an entity responsible for researching and developing new technologies: the Bureau of Research and Manufacturing.¹²¹ It comes in the form of a long letter written by someone called Abu-’Abd-al-Rahman al-Masri to an unknown, but presumably senior, audience within the hierarchy of the Islamic State.¹²² In it, he complains in great detail regarding what he sees as the inept leadership of Abu-Hammam al-’Iraqi, the leader of manufacturing in Raqqa. These include seemingly capricious efforts to transfer employees out of the organization who have relevant skills, jealousy of the knowledge of skilled employees, and a lack of management skills related to both personnel and supplies. His level of frustration regarding the leadership of the unit in charge of manufacturing military weapons is best summed up with his own words: “If they are not agents and spies, which is most likely the case as I believe, they are playing the same role even better than those

115 CTC_ComplaintBox_192

116 CTC_ComplaintBox_165

117 CTC_ComplaintBox_336

118 Nor was the experience of having bad military leadership or conditions unique to the Complaint Box documents. One previously published primary source document from Syria in 2016 highlighted a large number of concerns with a particular brigade. Aymenn Jawad Al-Tamimi, “Detailed Monthly Report on the Omar bin al-Khattab Brigade,” The Islamic State Archives, May 5, 2024.

119 CTC_ComplaintBox_259

120 CTC_ComplaintBox_256

121 Naming conventions are not always consistent, but this may also be what is known as the Military Development and Manufacturing Committee or the Military Manufacturing and Development Committee. See Specimens 19A, 30H, 30K, and 30L in Aymenn Al-Tamimi’s archive. See also Don Ressler, Muhammad al-`Ubaydi, and Vera Mironova, “The Islamic State’s Drone Documents: Management, Acquisitions, and DIY Tradecraft,” CTC Perspectives, January 31, 2017.

122 CTC_ComplaintBox_6

real spies.” It is quite a damaging internal assessment that their incompetence was so harmful that the author assumed they were working for the enemy.

The military rise and decline of the Islamic State received a large amount of media attention. The few documents selected for discussion in this section provide detailed accounts of specific challenges in the organization, execution, and leadership of the group’s military efforts. Taken as a whole, this section is a reminder that even when the group was experiencing some level of success militarily, there were still fractures and points of tension within the organization. Keeping that fact in mind, regardless of what the group did in the past and what it may still do in the future, it is critical to providing an accurate assessment of its capabilities and weaknesses.

Conclusion

This report might be seen as a simple collection of stories written by people who were either members of the Islamic State or those who lived under its control. But, taken together, these stories paint a picture of a group that faced significant challenges to match its governance vision to the reality that existed on the ground. These challenges were the result of two factors. On one hand, they were the result of the normal struggles faced by any entity seeking to institute formal processes among a population. Governance involves mundane issues related to keeping track of paperwork, developing systems for resolving disputes, and seeking to ensure that the governed, at a minimum, find their situation to be preferable to other alternatives. But, on the other hand, many of these challenges came as a result of the specific ideology and objectives motivating the Islamic State’s organizational efforts.

Despite what has been shown in this report in terms of complaints and challenges existing within the Islamic State, it is worth noting that these documents also do illustrate that the group has a system in place to cultivate, investigate, and resolve complaints, even if it appears to have not functioned perfectly at times. This system may have improved over time, although the data here do not permit an assessment of whether this was the case or not. Still, the fact that the Islamic State did have an organizational program in place to find and resolve complaints should serve as a reminder to those who believe that the group either does not care about public opinion or did not engage in any activities to try to provide those living under its control with some level of representation. Even the Islamic State, one of the most violent of militant groups over the past decade, sought to implement programs to try and minimize the disconnect between its vision of what it wanted to achieve and the challenges in actually doing so.

One weakness of this report is that it is based on documents pertaining to Islamic State efforts at bureaucracy in Iraq and Syria from 2014-2017, which may seem outdated given that they are being released in 2024. And while there is no denying that the Islamic State during that time period is different than the Islamic State of today, there are at least five reasons that this report and the accompanying material remain relevant for students and scholars of this movement and political violence.

First, these documents provide a detailed look inside the Islamic State caliphate in the words of those who lived in it. Given the fact that the material was untouched by propagandists or governments, and notwithstanding the incentives that individuals may have had to embellish their complaint, these documents offer a unique window into the group’s governance efforts. Of course, those who wanted to file complaints still had to approach the group to do so, which may have resulted in a downplaying of the severity of the information provided. However, as seen in the nature of the complaints provided here, there were still many severe accusations levied and issues raised through the complaint process. By releasing this unique body of information, it is hoped that this information can be a part of future work on this subject.

Second, understanding the living conditions and challenges faced by those living under the control of the Islamic State can be useful for repatriation and rehabilitation efforts. As noted by the U.S. State

Department in December 2023, in the two preceding years nearly 7,000 people from 30 different countries had been repatriated from Islamic State-held territory, but approximately 48,000 people remain housed in camps in northeastern Syria.¹²³ On top of this are the more than 9,000 prisoners held by the Syrian Democratic Forces in prison facilities.¹²⁴ As individuals return home either to reintegrate into society or face accountability for illegal activities, having reliable documentation regarding the actual experiences they might have encountered could be helpful for providing services for those impacted and prosecuting those responsible.

Third, the Islamic State is a highly bureaucratized organization that has displayed that it routinely maintains and implements institutional memory. As one scholar has noted, the group's governance efforts are, in some senses, iterative and likely to continue to be attempted until it is either destroyed or able to see the realization of its vision.¹²⁵ It is very likely that many of the approaches and challenges featured in this report will feature in the group's current and future efforts to govern territory.

Fourth, this material has offered another perspective on the efforts of militant groups (such as the Islamic State) to cultivate and maintain some level of internal public support for their activities. The external efforts by terrorists to impact public support, either through spectacular attacks or political negotiations, have been well documented and researched.¹²⁶ This report, however, offers a brief peek under the hood of their internal efforts to address concerns that rise from their constituency, both members and civilians alike. Although there is no single document in this collection in which a leadership figure was arguing that the group needed to care about public support, the mere existence of a system to acquire, investigate, and resolve complaints is intriguing. This system may show that the group concerned itself with public opinion and sentiment to some extent. It also may be argued that, rather than public opinion, this system is a demonstration of the group's desire to pursue justice that it believes is its divine obligation to achieve once it has implemented its interpretation of religious law.

Fifth, although the flow of foreign fighters into Syria in support of various militant groups is large in comparison to most other historical examples, it is not unlikely that another movement, whether a future iteration of the Islamic State or some other jihadi group, will once again attract individuals to its vision.¹²⁷ Although the reasons that individuals travel to join these groups vary, some doubtless travel in an effort to live under a governing entity that minimizes the gap between what it proports to stand for and what it does in reality. This report and the associated documents have highlighted the struggles of the Islamic State in this regard and may serve as a cautionary warning to those who may be inclined in the future to give their allegiance to such efforts.

Ultimately, the hope is that this report and the Complaint Box documents will serve as a resource for the broader scholarly and policy community to better understand how militant groups implement their governance efforts, but also the ways in which those efforts may struggle. This knowledge may be critical in identifying and amplifying those weaknesses in an effort to undermine active support for the Islamic State and in removing some of the luster that still exists in its propaganda regarding the well-functioning society it claims to be able to build.

123 Christine Asetta, "Progress in Repatriations: How Foreign Assistance Is Addressing the Humanitarian and Security Crises in Northeast Syria: Part 1 of 2," U.S. Department of State, December 3, 2023.

124 "Defeat ISIS Mission in Iraq and Syria for January through March 2024," U.S. Central Command Press Release, April 5, 2024.

125 Matthew Bamber-Zryd, "Cyclical jihadist governance: the Islamic State governance cycle in Iraq and Syria," *Small Wars & Insurgencies* 33:8 (2022): pp. 1,314-1,344.

126 Henar Criado, "Bullets and votes: Public opinion and terrorist strategies," *Journal of Peace Research* 48:4 (2011): pp. 497-508.

127 David Malet, "Foreign Fighter Mobilization and Persistence in a Global Context," *Terrorism and Political Violence* 27:3 (2015): pp. 454-473.



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AT WEST POINT