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THE ISIS FILES

An Introduction

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What happened in Iraq and Syria over the last seven years constitutes one of the darkest pages of the recent history of an already tormented region. The Islamic State (commonly referred to as ISIS, the acronym of its previous name, Islamic State in Iraq and Sham), a powerful group driven by an ultra-fundamentalist and millenarian ideology, managed to control an area the size of Britain and dominated its residents with an iron fist. It subjugated, terrorized and confiscated property of religious minorities. It mercilessly killed its opponents. It created a pervasive system of enforcement of strict moral codes, meting out corporal punishment to those who did not abide by them. It used its territory to plan and incite terrorist attacks worldwide. It even officially introduced slavery, sanctioning it with religious edicts and imposing it on thousands of women from the Yazidi minority in Iraq.

In order to do all this the Islamic State created an extremely sophisticated bureaucracy. Seeing itself as a state, it created ministries, administrations, a complex tax collection system, even a consumer protection agency. This bureaucracy, like any other, left behind a huge paper trail; a myriad of documents that reveal the inner workings of one of history’s deadliest and most organized terrorist organizations.

Starting in 2015, as the Iraqi government and the international community began to take the battle to ISIS, New York Times reporter Rukmini Callimachi spent several months embedded with the Iraqi military as it liberated areas of Iraq from the group. While reporting on the military efforts, Callimachi also obtained permission from the Iraqi army officials she was embedded with to retrieve some of the documents ISIS left behind. She ended up collecting some 15,000 pages of documents that include lands deeds, tax returns, military strategies, internal regulations, police files, grammar books, photos, and many other primary sources which reveal part of the Islamic State’s inner workings.

The documents, which came to be known as The ISIS Files, constitute one of the largest collections of original files from the group in possession of a non-governmental entity. Callimachi and The New York Times understood the importance of making this collection, which documents a dark page of
recent history that has hardly been completely turned, available to the public.

As a research outfit committed to providing practitioners and the public with fact-based analysis on terrorism and political violence, the Program on Extremism at The George Washington University is elated to have been chosen by *The New York Times* as its partner in this effort. Working closely with *The New York Times*, The George Washington University has engaged in a multi-year project to digitize, translate, analyze and publish The ISIS Files, with the intent of making them accessible to a broad array of stakeholders while adhering to strict academic and ethical standards.

The project is complex and multifaceted. The following is a brief overview of the activities related to the project conducted and planned by the Program on Extremism and the George Washington University Libraries and Academic Innovation (GWLAI).

**Digitizing**

Starting in September 2018, the Program on Extremism hired a company to professionally scan The ISIS Files documents. The documents were named and categorized using a standardized system that allows for systematic archiving. Furthermore, each document was checked one by one to ensure that the digitization was done in an acceptable manner. The original copies of the documents were then hand-delivered by *The New York Times* to the Iraqi Embassy to the United States. The ISIS Files project does not hold any original documents.

**Translating**

The vast majority of The ISIS Files are in Arabic. Understanding the importance of providing high-quality and culturally competent translations, the Program on Extremism hired two experienced translators to lead the translation effort. Both translators are Iraqi natives (one of them from the Mosul area, providing him with important insights into the area in which most of the documents were gathered) with considerable experience as professional translators for prominent Iraqi and international institutions.
The translators were asked to follow strict translation guidelines, in order to ensure that there is consistency in spellings across all documents. After the initial translation, each document was then checked by at least two separate individuals, including a second translator and an Arabic metadata specialist. Additional due diligence was also carried out on the documents to ensure that the formatting of the English documents visually looks similar to the Arabic documents, allowing for a side by side comparison.

**Publishing on a website**

The Program on Extremism and GWLAI have decided to publish the files on an open, searchable website as a public repository. This will allow researchers and various stakeholders throughout the world to access a wide array of documents that provide invaluable evidence on the activities and atrocities carried out by the Islamic State.

**Ethical considerations**

The ethical, legal and security implications involved in this effort are plentiful. Balancing the need to inform the public with that of protecting the security of individuals mentioned in the documents is a particularly challenging task.

For this very reason we chose to take a substantial amount of time (18 months) before releasing the documents. During this time the Program on Extremism conducted extensive research on the ethics and best practices of archiving and publishing sensitive documents. A crucial part of this work entailed engaging with individuals and institutions that have experience in the field. Thanks to a planning grant awarded by the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation, the Program conducted four workshops (in New York, London, The Hague and Washington, DC) in which a broad array of stakeholders provided input on how best to tackle the many ethical issues involved with the project. Moreover, the Program contacted roughly 300 stakeholders and potential users to “pick their brains” about ethical concerns and use of the files.

The feedback received allowed us to think through many issues and ethical concerns of the project. We tried to incorporate all the suggestions
received, mindful that, as predictable, many were contradicting one another. It is a fact that there is no consensus on matters related to ethical treatment of documents but we made a good faith effort to research the issue as extensively as possible and operate to what are among the highest standards in the field.

A document detailing our approach to these important matters is posted on the project’s website.

**Analysis**

Internal records represent a key component for a sound understanding of the Islamic State, as any other terrorist group. They represent, in a sense, the group’s true essence, not the face it wanted the outside world to see through its propaganda. But The ISIS Files do not hold all the secrets to understanding every aspect of the Islamic State, far from it. They were collected in a handful of buildings that ISIS used as administrative offices and bases over a relatively short amount time and for the most part in and around Mosul. Considering the size of ISIS’s sprawling bureaucracy, they represent a fairly small sample, a drop in the sea of ISIS’ paperwork.

In a nutshell, The ISIS Files provide a unique snapshot over some aspects of how the group thought some issues and functioned in some fields. But this information acquires significantly increased value when properly analyzed and contextualized. This rare trove of primary sources can, in fact, shed significant light on the ideology and inner-workings of the Islamic State when combined with other sources of knowledge on the group, from other internal documents to the group’s propaganda, from interviews with current and former IS members to scholarly analysis on the group.

For this very reason, the Program on Extremism has decided to accompany the release of The ISIS Files documents with analytical products. Over the next year, the Program on Extremism will periodically release batches of The ISIS Files documents, in their original in Arabic and English translation, that deal with a specific subject (ISIS’s redistribution of land, policing, fiscal and economic administration, military tactics and so on). The release of the documents will coincide with the
publication of a study that will focus on the same topic. These studies analyze and contextualize The ISIS Files on the specific topic, combining them with what is already known about it from other sources.

The ISIS Files touch upon several, diverse topics. A deeper understanding of what these documents reveal can come only from scholars and analysts with knowledge on specific aspects of the Islamic State. For this very reason, the Program on Extremism has engaged with a broad array of scholars and institutions, seeking to tap into their expertise. Several experts were consulted and some of them were asked to author some of the reports that accompany the publication of the documents.

Moreover, since we embarked on this project, the Program has interacted with many entities. From national and international prosecutorial bodies to law enforcement and intelligence agencies, from victims’ rights organizations to media outlets, the Program has engaged with a broad array of stakeholders that expressed an interest in various aspects of the project. Mindful of the legal and ethical obstacles that some of these interactions might raise, the Program has generally been keen to provide support to those who possess a legitimate interest in the project.

It is our strong belief that academic institutions like ours have a mandate to document and preserve history. As Nelson Mandela put it, “the purpose of studying history is not to deride human action, nor to weep over it or to hate it, but to understand it. And hopefully then to learn from it as we contemplate our future.” The ISIS Files project seeks to fulfil this goal and to do so while trying to adhere to the highest ethical and scholarly standards.