

News

Inside the Caliphate: Islamic State's Double Standards Sow Growing Disillusion

Public increasingly disillusioned with Daesh promises to install utopian state

By **Hamza Hendawi**
Associated Press

GAZIANTEP, Turkey—Mohammed Saad, a Syrian activist, was imprisoned by the Islamic State group, hung by his arms and beaten regularly. Then one day, his jailers quickly pulled him and other prisoners down and hid them in a bathroom.

The reason? A senior Muslim cleric was visiting to inspect the facility. The cleric had told the fighters running the prison that they shouldn't torture prisoners and that anyone held without charge must be released within 30 days, Saad told The Associated Press. Once the coast was clear, the prisoners were returned to their torment.

"It's a criminal gang pretending to be a state," Saad said, speaking in Turkey, where he fled in October. "All this talk about applying Shariah and Islamic values is just propaganda. Daesh is about torture and killing," he said, using the



In this Nov. 24, 2014, file photo, Iraqi army soldiers deploy in front of a court run by the Islamic State group after regaining control of the town of Sadiyah in Diyala province, 60 miles (95 kilometers) north of Baghdad, Iraq. Despite the atrocities that made it notorious, the Islamic State group depicts itself as bringing a reign of justice and equality for Muslims under its radical version of Shariah law. But Syrians who have escaped its rule say public disillusionment is growing with jihadi fighters who have become an elite class.

Arabic acronym for IS.

Syrians who have recently escaped the Islamic State group's rule say public disillusionment is growing as IS has failed to live up to its promises to install a utopian "Islamic" rule of justice, equality and good governance.

Instead, the group has come to resemble the dictatorial rule of Syrian

President Bashar Assad that many Syrians had sought to shed, with a reliance on informers who have silenced a fearful populace. Rather than equality, society has seen the rise of a new elite class — the jihadi fighters — who enjoy special perks and favor in the courts, looking down on "the commoners" and even ignoring the rul-

ings of their own clerics.

Despite the atrocities that made it notorious, the Islamic State group had raised hopes among some fellow Sunnis when it overran their territories across parts of Syria and Iraq and de-

against themselves or family.

"Daesh justice has been erratic," said Nayef, who hails from IS-held eastern Syrian town of al-Shadadi and escaped to Turkey in November with his family, largely

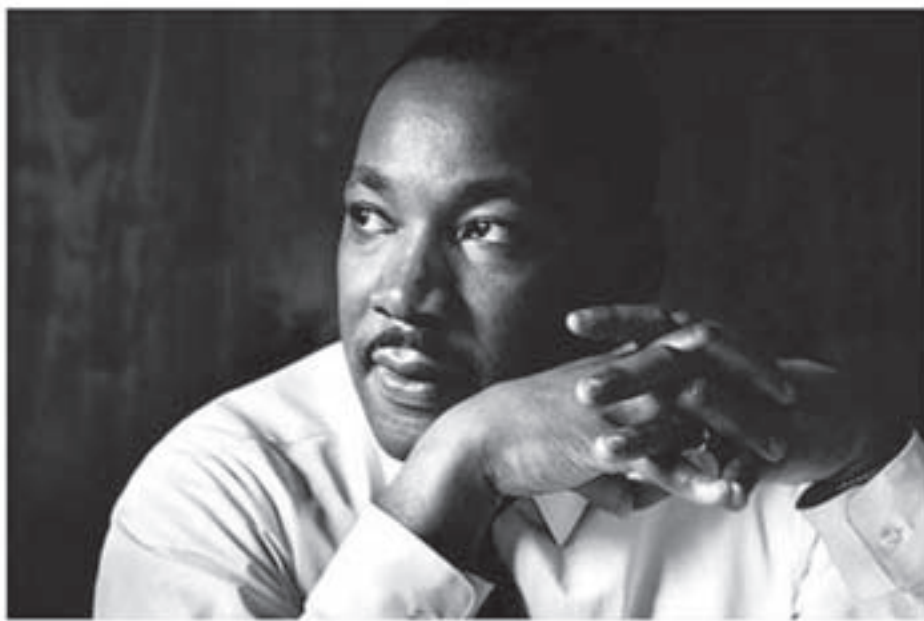
because military reversals appear to have put strains on its finances. U.S. and Russian airstrikes have heavily hit its oil infrastructure — a major source of funds. Over the past year, the group has lost 30 percent of the territory it once held in Iraq and Syria, according to the U.S.-led anti-IS coalition. Many of those interviewed by the AP said there are lengthier cutoffs of water and electricity in their towns and cities and prices for oil and gas have risen.

Abu Salem, an activist from the eastern city of Deir el-Zour, said public acceptance of IS rule is eroding. "It has made an enemy of almost everyone," he told the AP in the Turkish city of Reyhanli on the Syrian border.

One sign of the distance between the claims and realities is a 12-page manifesto by IS detailing its judicial system.

The document, a copy

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clared a "caliphate" in the summer of 2014. It presented itself as a contrast to Assad's rule, bringing justice through its extreme interpretation of Shariah and providing services to residents, including loans to farmers, water and electricity, and alms to the poor. Its propaganda machine promoting the dream of an Islamic caliphate helped attract jihadis from around the world.

In Istanbul and several Turkish cities near the Syrian border, the AP spoke to more than a dozen Syrians who fled IS-controlled territory in recent months. Most spoke on condition they be identified only by their first names or by the nicknames they use in their political activism for fear of IS reprisals

because of Russian airstrikes. "They started off good and then, gradually, things got worse." He insisted that his last name not be printed, fearing for his safety.

The group has recruited informers in the towns and cities it controls to watch out for any sign of opposition.

"Like under the (Assad) regime, we were also afraid to talk against Daesh to anyone we don't fully trust," said Fatimah, a 33-year-old whose hometown of Palmyra was taken over by IS early last year. She fled to Turkey in November with her husband and five children to escape Russian and Syrian airstrikes.

IS has also become less able to provide public services, in large part

of which was obtained by the AP, heavily emphasizes justice and tolerance. For example, it sets out the duties of the Hisba, the "religious police" who ensure people adhere to the group's dress codes, strict separation of genders and other rules.

The escaped Syrians all complained of the brutal extremes that the Hisba resorts to. One woman who lived in

Raqqa said that if a woman is considered to have violated the dress codes, the militants flog her husband, since he is seen as responsible for her.

When her neighbor put out the garbage without being properly covered, she said, the woman's husband was whipped.

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