

MASARYK UNIVERSITY
Faculty of Social Studies
Department of International Relations and European Studies



FINAL PAPER

“Analysis of the Islamic State’s global actorness potential: the group’s autonomy,
representation and influence”

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MVZ489 Causes of Political Violence

by **Valeriia Gladkaia (uco 454490)**

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Introduction

Nowadays nonstate actors play a significant role in international relations, challenging the state-centricism of international system. Violent nonstate actor, i.e. nonstate actor using violence to pursue its goals, is probably the most dangerous type of nonstate entity. The Islamic State is one of the most influential jihadist groups in modern history and undoubtedly the most violent one. This paper is intended to analyze the group's autonomy, representation and influence. I argue that the Islamic State has great global actorness potential that is based on the group's high degree of autonomy, almost unlimited regeneration potential and great influence on states and on international system.

Theoretical background

This paper is intended to characterize IS's activities and evaluate the group's global actorness potential. The present paper analyzes the Islamic State's autonomy, representation and influence, using theoretical framework offered by Ersel Aydinli in the article "Assessing violent nonstate actorness in global politics: a framework for analysis". The article provides a theoretical framework for evaluating the global political potential (or actorness) of violent nonstate actors. The framework includes three dimensions of analysis: autonomy, representation and influence (Aydinli 2013). All of these characteristics are essential, however, the group's global actorness potential is based on IS regeneration. That's why special focus will be on the second dimension – representation. To describe the Islamic State's legitimacy, its members' loyalty to the group, the group's sustainability and identity social constructivism and branding theory are used. David Kilcullen's theories of competitive control and of insurgencies as social (or organic) systems are used in order to describe the group's autonomy and to explain its rapid emergence and empowerment.

Autonomy

According to Aydinli, a VNSA's autonomy should be characterized through following factors: distance from state and distance from the international state system. The former includes two dimensions: an actor's freedom from state involvement (support) and its ability to survive state persecution; the latter includes being sovereignty-free. The first factor characterizes the degree to which a VNSA is beholden to any state and an actor's dependence on state support. The fewer ties between a VNSA and state(s), the more autonomous it can be considered. A further distinction in "degree" of autonomy can be made between "being able to survive without state support" and "being able to survive state persecution" ("passive" and "active" autonomy).

Thus, passive autonomy characterizes those VNSA that are able to exist free from state involvement, active autonomy characterizes those VNSA that are able to defend themselves effectively against statist efforts to defeat it. The second factor describes a VNSA's distance from the overall international "legitimate" state-centric system. This distance can be considered from two perspectives: how well the VNSA is able to create new alternative regime instruments and agencies (or adapt to existing ones) in order to function; how well the VNSA is able to manipulate weaknesses within the state-centric regime. Sovereignty-free actors are able to avoid the constraints of states and thus are more efficient and autonomous (Aydinli 2013).

The Islamic State seems to be a relatively more nonstatist actor. The amount of influence states hold over the Islamic State is very small. However, characterizing the degree of the Islamic State's connection with statist principles, we can say that despite the fact that it fights against states and existing world order, the Islamic State adheres to some state norms and regulations. Particularly, it acts like a government in captured territories, setting a normative system based on wide-spectrum systems of control (Kilcullen 2010). Moreover, the Islamic State uses states' territory and their resources and infrastructure. However, IS seems to have no interest in being accepted as a state (Falk 2015), offering new transnational form of "citizenship" and challenging state-centricism. Besides, it doesn't receive direct financial support from states, receiving money from private individuals and "charity organizations" and profiting off of illicit oil and gas trade, human trafficking, drug trade, hostage-taking, antiquities trade, collecting of taxes and donations. Thus, the Islamic State can be considered to be highly autonomous actor, because its existence doesn't depend on state or states. Moreover, it has active autonomy, because it is able not only to exist without state support, but to survive states' persecution and effectively defend itself from states' attacks (despite states' interventions against IS the group is still able to function). The Islamic State is also able to find alternative locations from which to conduct its activities (cells/individuals in different countries, including Europe); to use alternative practices to earn or to transfer money (legal companies used to finance illegal operations, use of crypto-currency); to manipulate states' weaknesses, using failing states' territories as platforms for their activities; to evade the constraints of state and pursue its own interests.

All in all, IS has almost no ties with states. It is free from state involvement, it is able to survive state persecution, it is sovereignty-free. Its relations with states are conflictive. It fights against states and state-centricism. It has very high degree of autonomy that contributes to IS's global actorness potential.

Representation

Representation seems to be the most important dimension for analysis, because it is the basis of the Islamic State's actorness potential. According to Aydinli, a VNSA's representation includes regeneration (building recognition/establishing legitimacy that lets attract new members, and generating loyalty that lets maintain membership) and managing ideological and organizational overstretch (Aydinli 2013). However, these categories are interconnected: recognition/legitimacy among "old" members and new members' loyalty to the group are also necessary conditions for maintaining high regeneration potential. Legitimacy refers to a belief in the VNSA's ability to meet its members' needs, loyalty is the degree to which members feel connected to the group. The greater the connection or "loyalty" of a members, the more that group will be able to maintain its representation, and the greater its potential role may be in global politics (Aydinli 2013).

Loyalty is based on IS ideology and on constructing new group identity. The Islamic State's ability to generate loyalty among its members is very high, because it relies on religious principles to indoctrinate. Religion is at the core of individual and group identity. The Islamic State is ideologically defined, that's why the pool of potential recruits is large. The core idea of the Islamic State's strategy is the awakening of the Muslim *umma*. The Islamic State is not only a militant group, it is a brand, a media project, a cultural community, a subculture. That's why the Islamic State effectively recruits not only locally, but also internationally.

Recruitment in Syria and Iraq (local recruitment) is based not only on intimidation. The Islamic state is a hybrid organization that combines Al-Qaida's and Taliban's tactics. It acts like a government in captured areas trying to set a normative system based on wide-spectrum systems of control (Kilcullen 2010). It offers protection, social institutions and services. It claims to be a Sunni organization and a solution for the actively repressed Sunni populations. It also claims to provide an alternative to the poor governance of Syrian and Iraqi regimes. It builds legitimacy by using resources appropriated illicitly, however, it is not important for ordinary people: they support IS, because they have no better alternative, because real governments are worse and weaker than the Islamic State. Syrian and Iraqi regimes are not able to perform their primary functions. However, IS also attracts members of Saddam Hussein's defeated army, fighters from Syrian rebel groups, new recruits from Iraq, Syria and neighboring countries, foreign fighters and global Internet recruits (Graham 2015), who are driven by idea and religious motivation or by material gain.

IS international recruitment is based on its media effort. The Islamic State's online propaganda is extremely effective. Its online propaganda brand has several hallmarks: victimhood, agency, youthfulness, glorification of death and martyrdom, narrative of revolution and resistance, high production values and impressive visual effects. The Islamic State claims that Western "crusaders" suppress Muslims, kill and injure them, block the creation of the Islamic state. It says that jihad is the only just response, and terrorism is a legitimate tactic in jihad. The Islamic State's propaganda materials say its viewer: it is up to you to help us, to protect Muslims and to retrieve them from certain death. The group appeals to deep human emotions. The Islamic State's propaganda targets young people (20+ year old, however, some of (potential) recruits are much younger), and IS operatives disseminate propaganda materials through various popular social media platforms, such as Twitter, Facebook, WhatsApp, Viber, Instagram, Skype, Tumblr, YouTube, Ask.fm, Google Play, used by every young man or woman. ISIS posters, photos, magazines and videos look very professional, reminding of Hollywood movies and popular video games and showing IS fighters in a romantic way; its *nasheeds* are very catchy and melodic, and sound like hip-hop songs; its cyber-branding is very high quality. IS propaganda generates a sense of purpose, shared identity, and inclusivity among IS's recruits (Leggiero 2015). Its propaganda gives credibility and religious legitimacy to the group's narrative and creates a virtual community of the Islamic State's fans. The Islamic State's online propaganda is effective, because it creates the group's attractive image and addresses people's ambitions, grievances and sense of justice, reconstructing their identity and creating new group one based on radical Islam. People, who are subject to alienation, who don't believe in their states' ability to meet their needs (basic needs or more philosophical needs like religious practices) and have personal grievances, who have social difficulties and feel excluded from society are convinced that the Caliphate will provide them with everything. Life in the Caliphate seems to be a good chance to start a new life, to become a member of a community, to do something meaningful and belong to something special. The Caliphate seems to be an emotionally very attractive place, offering a society of "true Muslims" where all people are friends. ISIS uses the notion of *hijira* as justification for people of all backgrounds loyal to ISIS populate the Caliphate (Leggiero 2015). The Islamic State offers its members new life and new group transnational religious identity, it has a great potential to reconstruct individual identities and create a new collective one. The Islamic State shifts loyalty away from states, replacing state loyalty with loyalty to a religious identity and destroying people's weak loyalties to their states. Loyalty to religious and ideological identity of the Islamic State is often stronger than loyalty to a state, because religious principles are more binding. Besides, Jihadist movement has the ancient established norms and procedures, its religious and political legitimacy is emphasized in

its aggressive propaganda. IS's narrative uses group identity to prevent an individual from employing any other values that could disrupt ISIS's group coherence and unified action. ISIS makes the sacred value (e.g. governance by Allah) incompatible with other values. When the value becomes non-negotiable, the individual relies on emotional processing opposed to complex reasoning processes (Leggiero 2015). The group's internal cohesion and effectiveness depends upon continuing indoctrination. A core part of this indoctrination is a steady diminution of the self. In IS, everything that is unique about an individual is criticized, forbidden, or diminished (Graham 2015).

The Islamic State also can be characterized as a cultural community: it offers its members its own religion, ideology, mythology, music (*nasheeds* – ideological songs with pro-jihadist lyrics), poetry, mode of dress, magazines, newspapers and slang (in social media). Thus, it may be called a social movement or youth subculture as well.

It is able to generate necessary level of loyalty among its members: they feel connected to the group. The Islamic State is able to establish legitimacy among its (potential) members as well: they are sure that the Caliphate will meet their need. Its effective propaganda is main reason of this belief. IS posters, photos and videos show its fighters as heroes and attract both men (who want to earn a lot of money and fight for something lofty) and women (who want to marry heroic, strong and brave IS fighters and have children). Overall, (potential) IS recruits believe that the Islamic State will meet their needs, be they needs of providing basic security, financial reward or philosophical and psychological needs.

The Islamic State is successful violent nonstate actor, because it is able to exist and function. Moreover, committing violence and disseminating its horrifying videos in the Internet, the Islamic State receives a lot of attention, and states, feeling obliged to respond, take actions to defeat IS. Thus, the Islamic State uses violence very successfully, receiving recognition not only from its members, but also outside the group.

Managing ideological and organizational overstretch may become a serious problem for the group in the future. However, at the present day it successfully controls overstretch and maintains security, ideological cohesiveness and sustainability. The Islamic State neutralizes differences among its recruits, its cells continue to be ideologically bound and still maintain operational cohesiveness.

Thus, the Islamic State is a relatively unified body of shared interests, values and goals. The Islamic State's actorness potential is based on its recruitment and regeneration. IS is a self-sustaining system whose existence and functioning are dependent on its ability to attract new members and generate loyalty among "old" ones. The Islamic State can identify its priorities and

policies and regenerate itself. The Islamic State recruits not only locally, but also internationally, that's why its regeneration potential is almost unlimited.

Influence

According to Aydinli, a VNSA can be considered to have influence if it showed evidence of a sustainable capacity, and if it constituted a transformative and compelling challenge to states and the statist system. A VNSA's influence includes two elements: sustainability and impact. Sustainability includes deterrent-resistant motivation and flexibility/adaptability; impact is based on compulsion and transformative capacity. Overall, this dimension describes a VNSA's ability to employ policy instruments or to implement decisions, its capacity to be able to make changes in policy and its influence and the ability to exert it on the international environment (Aydinli 2013).

The Islamic State is quite sustainable actor, because its recruitment is based not only on deterrence and intimidation, but also on idea that motivates its members to action even in the face of states' opposition. Ideological and religious principles the Islamic State is based on are the deepest and the most binding, moreover, they are deterrent-free. The Islamic State is able to make rapid and significant changes in its practices, tactics and strategies. It is always ready to make a "surprise" attack, using new methods and practices in order to harm: we know that they will attack, but we have no idea how, where and when they will do it. It has decentralized organizational structure, consisting of cells that are consolidated by strong ideology. The Islamic State is a new type of terrorist group that uses a great amount of various operational, organizational and recruitment tactics and innovations. Perhaps it is the most adaptable and that's why the most successful and dangerous terrorist group. The Islamic State's ability to exist and to carry out its activities, as well as its deft use of the transnational space as a sanctuary and milieu for basic functions, are crucial to its sustainability. Transnational space, used by IS, includes both physical spaces (failing states – Syria, Iraq, Afghanistan, Pakistan etc.), used for empowerment and armament, and nonphysical one (cyberspace), used for the purposes of propaganda and funding.

The first aspect to impact is that it should be compelling. The second aspect to impact is that it should be transformative, i.e. leading to changes in states' policies and practices. The group creates such a disturbance, and its actions receive so much attention in social media that states cannot ignore it. Thus, the Islamic State's actions are influential enough to make states change their policies or even to launch a military incursion (a noteworthy detail is that IS

welcomes Western states' military operations, because its members believe that the final battle with "apostates" in Dabiq will be prognostication to the apocalypse). The group is granted so called "negative recognition". It wages asymmetric war using terror as its primary method, and in large part because of globalization it receives a lot of attention from people, organizations and states, becoming fully recognized VNSA. The use of violence is extremely effective, because horrifying violent acts produce states' reaction. Further empowerment of the group leads to appropriation of weapons of mass destruction that could multiply the group's impact. The Islamic State strives to make transformations in the primary tenets of the state-centric system, destroying states' sovereignty and legitimacy. It denies states' ability to provide security to their citizens. This actor is really challenging the principles of statehood, because it raises question about the political legitimacy of states created in the Middle East after World War I. It offers a transnational nonstatist identity, claiming that the Muslim *umma* deserves the loyalty and adherence of believers whatever their location in national space happens to be (Falk 2015).

All in all, the Islamic State is sustainable, highly adaptable, compelling and transformative actor. It challenges state-centricism quite successfully, and can be considered to have great influence on states and on international system.

Conclusion

Analyzing the Islamic State's autonomy, representation and influence, we may conclude that the group's global actorness potential is very high. The Islamic State wages a war against the West, and this war may be described as a battle for hearts and minds of modern Muslims. The Islamic State, like a social system, has had no existence independent of its parent society (i.e. international system) (Kilcullen 2010), and that's why it is a materialization of its disadvantages, weaknesses and disproportions. To defeat the Islamic State, there is no need to fight against "symptoms of disease" using military might, it is necessary to focus on strengthening states' power, legitimacy and capacity to protect and provide their citizens' needs.

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