ISIS' Embrace of Violence
Strategic Rationale and Long-Run Implications

By David Jones

Much of the popular scholarship on the Islamic State has highlighted the group's embrace of violence as an indication of their irrationality. Here I argue that dismissing this violence as irrational ignores the ways in which the group uses it to their strategic advantage. This paper attempts to analyze the Islamic State's embrace of violence through an instrumentalist lens, using a modified theory of outbidding to explain not only why the group has embraced violence, but also why this approach is ultimately counterproductive. Drawing on primary sources from the Islamic State's English language magazine, Dabiq, as well as Jabhat Al-Nusra's Al-Risalah, I explain violence in instrumental terms – and highlight the Islamic State's usage of it as a recruiting tool and means of differentiation. I conclude by discussing why this strategy is ultimately counterproductive, highlighting some opportunities to leverage the Islamic State's strategy to hasten the group's downfall.

Introduction

The rise and success of the Islamic State (ISIS) has been one of the most well-documented, but poorly understood, evolutions of the post-9/11 Jihadist movement. The group rose from the ashes of Al-Qaeda in Iraq (AQI) and quickly seized massive swaths of land, first in Syria and Iraq, and then over much of the Middle East and North Africa as local insurgencies and terrorist groups looked to leverage ISIS's powerful brand to further their own objectives. While there are important distinctions between terrorist and insurgent groups, given ISIS's relatively fluid tactics and growing international reach, the group operates as a hybrid insurgency and terror network, and the terms will be considered largely synonymous for the purposes of this paper.[lvi] While the group's activity was previously largely constrained to the geographic areas in which it has a physical presence, recent events in Paris, Lebanon and the Sinai have indicated that the group is attempting to expand its operations and more directly attack the so-called 'Far Enemy', primarily the United States and its Western allies. ISIS has differentiated itself from both previous and many contemporary terror groups through its ability to recruit a large number of Western foreign fighters and its wholesale embrace and glorification of extreme violence. These phenomena are seemingly related, and raise questions about the apparent utility of brutality, as a means of attraction,

recruitment and governing. This has led some scholars to conclude that "brutality is working for [ISIS]" and that it forms the basis of an effective, medium to long-term strategy for the group.[lvii]

This paper will first explain why the Islamic State has embraced this sort of violence, arguing that if we accept ISIS as a rational actor, a modified theory of out-bidding serves to explain the group's promotion of overwhelming violence. Next, it will discuss why this violence is ineffective in the long-term, and briefly highlight some potential policy options for the coalition against ISIS that will exploit the group's use of violence and hasten its downfall.

Prior to delving into the paper's main argument, it is essential to address a key issue with its argument, which is premised upon a specific understanding of the actual goals of the Islamic State. Broadly, one can look at ISIS's actions as either being a step towards creating an Islamic Caliphate in the region, or as being indicative of some sort irrational, fanatical group, dedicated to hastening the apocalypse.[lviii] This latter explanation would then allow for the group's actions to be viewed as the by-product of "illogical theological imperatives", devoid of specific logic and order, and suggests that rationality should be suspended when attempting to understand the group's strategy.[lix] While its rhetoric is extreme, and at times appears irrational, the group's actual actions betray its intent to establish some sort of proto-state, and support viewing the actions of ISIS through an instrumentalist lens. Instrumentalism views the act of engaging in political violence as a rational means to achieve some goal. The group has demonstrated an impressive ability to conquer and hold land, recruit soldiers, establish some mechanisms of governance and provide social services – all indications of their sincere desire to maintain in the region for a prolonged period of time. Therefore this paper will assume that the group is "instrumentally rational and economically motivated", meaning it seeks to maximize its long-term utility, and assess ISIS's use of violence against that standard, determining whether strategies contribute to, or complicate, the group's desire to create a stable, long-term presence in the region.[lx]

The Rise of the Islamic State

To understand why ISIS embraces and promotes violence, as a rational strategy in support of its goals, it is helpful to briefly review the geopolitical and historic context from which the group emerged. While the Arab Spring was successful in sparking protests across the Middle East and North Africa (MENA), the movement largely fell short of its ostensible goals of pushing governmental change and reform. Rather, many governments in the region were only destabilized, not replaced, and these governments' already tenuous grip on internal security within their states was weakened further, creating large swaths of land where there was an effective power vacuum. Furthermore, there was an apparently tendency for MENA government to leverage ethnic/religious fault lines within their countries as they attempted to hold on to power. In Syria, as President Bashir Al-Assad, an Alawite, began to lose power, he began to more intensely persecute the powerless Sunni majority in the country, which provided a perfect pre-text for the reinvigoration of the Salafist Jihad movement, which is able to effectively coopt and escalate Sunni-Shia tensions for its own purposes. Similarly, after the American withdrawal from Iraq, President Nouri al-Maliki, also a Shia, began to once again persecute Iraq's Sunni population. These crackdowns and conflicts created physical safe havens and the societal preconditions necessary to facilitate the re-emergence of a strong Sunni terrorist/insurgent network.

Given the proximity of Iraq and Syria, and the relatively successful Sunni insurgency that existed in Iraq for much of the last decade, it makes sense that one would return to prominence as the civil war in Syria and the situation in Iraq worsened. The task then, is to explain why it was AQI (ISIS), and why the group severed its relationship with AQC. This explanation is critical to understanding ISIS's embrace of violence. While there were formal connections between AQI and AQC beginning in 2004 when Abu-Musab al-Zarqawi pledged allegiance (*baya)* to Bin Laden, AQC's ability to directly influence the actions of AQI was always somewhat limited.[lxi] Whatever linkages there were began to decline after al-Zarqawi's death, and were functionally non-existent after American troops killed Bin-Laden. Abu-Bakr al-Baghdadi, and his predecessor Abu-Omar al-Baghdadi, both strongly supported the application of a broad, violent, and cleansing brand of *takfir* jihad, whereas most of the senior leadership of Al-Qaeda, most notably Ayman Al-Zawahiri, argued for a more limited, strategic employment of the principle. The fundamental theological and strategic disagreements serves to at least partially explain why Abu-Bakr al-Baghdadi desired to formally split from AQC, and perhaps why the group has been so violent in its newest iteration.

Beyond these disagreements, it was also becoming increasingly obvious the American campaign against AQC was working, and that while the group retained inspirational clout, its ability to successfully plan and execute notable terror attacks was declining. Alongside their operational struggles, AQC also was increasingly unable to raise money, smuggle fighters and host training camps.[lxii] In many ways, AQC's brand had become somewhat tarnished, and there was space for a new challenger to carry the banner of Salafist-Jihad. These struggles contrast sharply with AQI's persistent ability, even after the American campaign to decimate them, to recruit and bring fighters and finances into the organization.[lxiii] This simmering discontent came to a head in 2013, when al-Baghdadi decided to change the group's name from *Al-Qaeda in Iraq* to the *Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham,* with the name change also denoting a geographic expansion of the group beyond the borders of Iraq and into Syria. With this rebranding, the group formally severed any remaining ties that may have remained with AQC, and relatively quickly, began to combat not only Assad's government forces but also other jihadist groups operating in Syria and Iraq, most notably the Al-Qaeda affiliated Jabhat Al-Nusra (JN).[lxiv] Given that ISIS and JN, while possessing different goals, are both competing for the same base of support, this rivalry gave rise to the need for a concerted effort by ISIS to differentiate itself. Unfortunately for civilians in Iraq and Syria, the group's predilection for violence became its selling point to potential supporters and fighters.

Insurgencies and terrorist networks tend to be violent organizations, however the violence that ISIS engages in goes beyond what is considered acceptable, not only by international civil society, but also by other Jihadist groups. While JN has been implicated in a number of mass murders in Syria, its violence – and certainly its pride in that violence – is notably more muted than ISIS. This stems, in part, from AQC's apparent moderation over the last number of years. Al-Zawahiri frequently wrote about the need for very narrowly applied violence. In *General Guidelines for Jihad,* he writes that Jihadists should "refrain from harming Muslims by explosions, killing, kidnapping or destroying their wealth or property" and that they should similarly "avoid meddling with Christian, Sikh and Hindu communities living in Muslim lands".[lxv] Similarly, Hamas has spoken out against the violent excess of ISIS.[lxvi] While judgements about the acceptability of violence are somewhat problematic, given their inherent

subjectivity, the rejection by peers implies that ISIS's violence does violate some existing norms, not only within Western liberal society, but also within the Jihadist movement itself.

Comparing Jabhat Al-Nusra and ISIS's Approach to Violence, and the Promotion Thereof

The graphic videos created by ISIS, shared on sites like Twitter, YouTube and Liveleak, make their way onto cell phones and computer screens around the world. Many of the images in these videos are reminiscent of humanity's darkest moments: Iraqi civilians lying face down in a ditch with their executors standing behind them, hauntingly similar to photos of *Einsatzgruppen* executing Jews during the Second World War; or a group of Syrian civilians hang on crosses in a town square, evocative of the dark period of the Roman Empire. ISIS also produces a high-quality magazine, *Dabiq*, which is distributed around the world. The content of these magazines elucidates ISIS's desire to differentiate itself through violence. The magazine is filled with images of the charred bodies of Syrian soldiers and the bodies of slain Western hostages, along with text glorifying these actions.[lxvii] *Dabiq* frequently publishes articles implying that JN's strategy of limited violence, and apparent protection of Druze civilians is cowardly, and instead encourages their slaughter.[lxviii] This violence, and encouragement thereof, often seems gratuitous and irrational, and there is an apparent desire to simplistically dismiss the violence as merely being a result of a group being a "death cult", rather it is a sort of macabre marketing scheme.[lxix]

JN also produces a magazine, known as *Al-Risalah,* which is less explicitly violent, and lacks the high-gloss, graphic images of executed hostages and beheadings that fill *Dabiq*. Even when describing the execution of an Assad regime soldier, the magazine notes important distinctions between JN and ISIS, mentioning that the soldier was "treated with mercy" and that "those of you who are expecting vivid descriptions of a head being separated from its body...you're going to be somewhat disappointed with this final segment".[lxx] Similarly, JN's magazine frequently takes aim at the violence of the Islamic State, recounting an alleged chemical attack by ISIS and noting that "it's time to stop calling them 'our brothers', for they will not hesitate in attacking us and chopping our heads off – all in the name of their illegitimate khilafa".[lxxi] The differing approaches to acknowledging and promoting the violent side of Jihad are placed in stark relief, and each group's strategy to define themselves in opposition to one another is apparent, however – it appears that ISIS's is proving more successful, at least in the short term.

Violence as a Form of Product Differentiation

As with any market, when a number of sellers are competing for the same group of buyers, they will attempt to make their product appear more attractive to the buyers and increase their market share. As mentioned above, JN and ISIS are effectively struggling for the support of the same set of donors and Salafi-Jihadist fighters. While the flow of money is critical, for ISIS, their main requirement appears to be foreign fighters. Volunteers from countries beyond Syria and Iraq are playing a major role in the conflict. While estimates vary broadly, the emerging scholarship suggests that there are approximately between 20,000 and 30,000 foreign fighters comprising up to 40% of the effective strength of active jihadist groups.[lxxii] The need for ISIS to draw supporters from foreign lands is particularly critical given that while JN enjoys the support of some of the indigenous population in Syria, ISIS fighters are viewed as occupiers, and do not enjoy any meaningful support in the areas they control.[lxxiii] This disparate support is, largely, the result of differing strategies for controlling the population in Syria. Whereas ISIS has

sought to govern through fear, JN's strategy appears to be a little more conciliatory. Therefore, it appears as though ISIS has pursued escalating violence as a means of outbidding JN and other groups in the region, and winning the allegiance and support of foreign fighters and financiers, even if it means alienating and slaughtering the local population.

The literature on terrorist group out-bidding suggests that this phenomenon will emerge when "two or more domestic parties are competing for leadership of their side, and the general population is uncertain about which of the groups best represents their interests".[lxxiv] One group will attempted to portray itself as the 'real thing' and differentiate itself from ideologically similar, but more moderate groups. Escalating violence is thus a means of proving the group's dedication to the cause, and willingness to be strong champions of the cause. Both the emergence of Hamas, in opposition to Fatah, and the Real Irish Republican Army (IRA), in contrast with the Provisional IRA are examples of this type of violence-driven outbidding, but both conflicts have had a primarily internal ethnic or religious dimension to them. However, what makes the actions of ISIS rather unique is that unlike Hamas and the IRA, who concentrated this escalated violence against a clearly identifiable ethnic enemy, ISIS is applying violence against not only members of other religions, but also Shias and those Sunnis that it considers to be *takfir* (apostate). This implies that winning the support of the broadest subset of their immediate constituency is not ISIS's foremost concern. Instead, this violence is intended to demonstrate their zeal to potential supporters around the world, and out-bid JN in the struggle for foreign fighters – the group that ISIS views as critical to their goal of maintaining a Caliphate.

Radical Communities vs. Radical Networks

Globalization has broadened the ability of groups to share their messages, and ISIS appears to be expanding the process of outbidding beyond the physical borders of the conflict. ISIS is appealing not only to the broader Muslim community (*Ummah*), but also to individuals – many of whom have no deep knowledge of Islam – who are more likely to be attracted by the violence, power and prestige that the group promises. Rather than placing the focus on theological comparisons between ISIS and JN, and making a sophisticated argument to win over the support of potential foreign fighters, ISIS attempts to use images of violence to persuade supporters. The advent of social media, and the increasing ease with which one can travel across the world, has made it easier for groups like ISIS to connect with individuals who are susceptible to their narrative.

When attempting to gather support for a terrorist movement, there is a broad, somewhat radical social organization on which terrorist groups can draw, a so-called radical milieu. Within this social group, there are two broad types of sub-communities which emerge. The first are radical communities, which are small, spatially concentrated communities with regional concerns or grievances. The second are radical networks; effectively a loosely connected, but numerically large group of individuals located around the world who are supportive of a certain ideology.[lxxv] ISIS has tried to leverage the existence of this international radical network, individuals broadly empathetic to the cause of Salafi-Jihadism, and portray itself as the most radical group within this radical milieu in an attempt to cast doubt on the sincerity of JN. ISIS then can focus on mobilizing the support of the fringe elements of this radical network, rather than trying to get the support of these smaller radical communities which exist in Syria and Iraq. This dovetails within their broader narrative strategy of establishing a Caliphate in the region,

and calling on 'true' Muslims from around the world to join them. Conversely, by remaining focused on local grievances and ignoring the desire to market itself as aggressively internationally, JN has focused on winning the support of these local radical communities, from which the group can expect to draw primarily indigenous fighters. Research into the type of recruit of that ISIS attracts suggests that ISIS's embrace of extreme violence attracts more devout, 'true believers' than JN, giving the leaders of the group an extremely malleable, if questionably effective, fighting force.[lxxvi] While this strategy is perhaps a gamble, it appears to be paying short-term dividends for ISIS.

In the near-term, their strategy of trying to out-bid other Jihadist groups by embracing an extreme form of violence that appeals to the international 'community' of Jihadists appears to be successful. Since its creation, it has surpassed JN as the primary destination for foreign fighters, with somewhere around 80% of foreign fighters flowing into the region joining the ranks of ISIS, implying that its strategy of out-bidding is working. [lxxvii] As this strategy has proven to be relatively successful for the group, this sort of violence will become normalized and self-reinforcing, as "the more [ISIS] perceives that extreme violence helps the group achieve its goals, the more likely it will continue to use it".[lxxviii] While this positive feedback loop may provide ISIS with an advantage in the short term, over time this extreme violence will soon begin to damage the group. Violence appears to be an effective recruiting tool, however it undermines the group's longer term goal. If ISIS wishes to establish a Caliphate, it needs to be able to effectively control the population under its control, and to continue to recruit individuals who have something valuable to offer the nascent state. Their present level of violence undermines both of these objectives. By appealing to the aforementioned international radical networks, and focusing their recruiting on international foreign fighters rather than adopting a policy of attraction and attempting to win the broad support of the local population, ISIS has undercut the foundation of their proto-state, as it essentially exists without active or passive support of the local communities it controls.

A Western Well Runs Dry

The trouble with the majority of the fighters that ISIS is recruiting, particularly those from Western countries, is that they are not particularly skilled. For many of these fighters, joining ISIS is their first experience in any sort of combat, and they often prove to be of little utility to the organization, frequently becoming highly-expendable shock troops or suicide bombers.[lxxix] As Western countries and their MENA allies become more adept at blocking the flow of foreign fighters, which is occurring, albeit slowly, ISIS will likely struggle to recruit more experienced Arab fighters, particularly from Iraq and Syria where ISIS's brand of extreme *takfir* violence is not as widely embraced as it is within the transnational radical networks from which it currently draws much of its support. While these radical networks have proved perhaps more fruitful over the short-term than relying on radial, spatially connected communities, these networks "do not seem to be as long-lasting as radical communities, inter alia because they are not territorially and socially 'rooted'".[lxxx]

This conundrum contrasts quite sharply with JN, which appears to have moderated over time, in part due to a desire to build up a stronger indigenous base of support. One JN fighter noted that many Arab fighters with experience in Afghanistan and Iraq were of the belief that "the truth has come out – the Mujahideen [Jabhat Al-Nusra] are in fact upon the correct and 'moderate' path, with IS being the extremists. So I think that IS is a blessing in disguise for the Muslim Ummah".[lxxxi] If these challenges to

the narratives of ISIS begin to take hold in Arab countries, concurrent with a slowdown in new Western recruits, ISIS will likely find it challenging to be able to maintain its fighting strength, and the group may begin to lose ground.

History Repeats Itself

History has shown that terrorists groups that engage in extreme violence and lack the support of the population tend to become victims of their own violence. For terrorist groups and insurgencies to be successful, they must maintain the support of the actual physical population in the areas they control. Audrey Cronin identifies a number of avenues through which support for a terrorist group may decline, two of which seem applicable to the case of ISIS: "the government may offer supporters of a terrorist group a better alternative" and "populations can become uninterested in the ideology or objectives of a terrorist group". [lxxxii] In the specific case of the Syrian Civil War, while the government may not offer civilians a better alternative, it appears increasingly likely that JN may do just that. Whereas the Islamic State appears to have evolved and endorsed attacks against the Far Enemy, like further alienating civilians in the areas it controls, JN has consistently moderated, and has recently insisted on having only local ambitions, being primarily focused on removal of Assad, and espousing a relatively moderate ideology. [lxxxiii] While ISIS has centered its strategy on attracting foreign fighters and strategically portraying itself as extremely violent, its primary ideological challenger focused on making itself palatable to a populous tired of conflict. Max Abrahms notes that while terrorism is generally ineffective, the few times that it has worked, successful groups have focused on pursuing limited objectives, i.e. the removal of Assad, rather than maximal, ideological goals – establishing a Caliphate. [lxxxiv]

Most telling – and certainly most damningly – is ISIS's previous experience, when it was AQI, with employing a strategy of incredible violence. After the invasion of Iraq by the United States in 2003, the country rather quickly declined into an incredibly bloody sectarian conflict, AQI seized this insecurity and engaged in its own campaign of extreme violence with the in an "attempt to bully the tribal leadership into conformity with the jihadists' political vision".[lxxxv] While the group initially experienced some success in entrenching itself in Iraq, American forces were able to leverage underlying discontent, resulting from the AQI's violence, amongst the Sunni tribes in the region with their new extremist neighbours and convince the tribesmen to take up arms against AQI. This was quite a remarkable event, as it was an explicit, and broad-based rejection by the group that AQI presumed to protect and represent Iraqi Sunnis. Then, as now, it appears as though "[AQI]'s positive goal of establishing an enduring stem-land for the Caliphate in western Iraq appears in retrospect to have been wildly optimistic".[lxxxvi] While AQI could have likely cemented itself as an effective insurgency, its fetishization and promotion of violence, paired with its unrealistic assessments of its own power proved to be the source of its defeat.

Hastening the Downfall: Leverage Points

As the coalition to combat ISIS begins to coalesce and look at avenues to dismantle the organization, there are a few key policy avenues that should be considered. While countering the violent narrative of ISIS directly has proven to be challenging, given the fact that foreign fighters continue to be seduced by it and flow into the region, there are other counter-messaging strategies that could be considered. The coalition should look to somehow amplify, albeit indirectly, JN's comparatively

moderate and less-violent narrative, ensuring that ISIS is forced to compete in the marketplace for ideas, and perhaps have to explain more convincingly the theological foundation for their violence. By offering individuals in Syria and Iraq, who may hold radical, but not necessarily violent, ideas about the constitution of government a constructive seat at the post-Assad table, Western governments may be able to undercut the appeal of ISIS's narrative and deny them sanctuary within that radical milieu. Further, as the flow of Western fighters likely begins to slow, there will be more fierce competition between JN and ISIS for fighters from the MENA region who may be more inclined to seriously consider the questionable religiousness of ISIS's violence.

Finally, the coalition should consider attempting to reinvigorate the Sunni tribes that united against AQI the first time for a similar campaign to defeat ISIS. While the United States has been attempting to arm groups that it narrowly defines as moderate in Syria, this process has been slow and fraught with logistical issues. Arming the Sunni tribes in eastern Syria and western Iraq, circumvents some of the issues with the highly fractured opposition in most of Syria. Additionally, while there will likely be a need to identify new, credible Sunni leaders in Iraq, the American military will certainly have existing connections and relationships that can be leveraged to expedite the process. Recognizing that finding a 'perfect' partner group to support in region is unlikely, and that there will certainly be more radical elements within these tribes, it still seems reasonable that partnering with a known entity against ISIS is preferable to continued inaction. Perhaps another Sunni-led quashing of ISIS's violent ideology will be enough to finally quash its extraordinarily violent stream of Salafist-Jihadism.

Conclusion

This paper first argued that to dismiss ISIS's violence as being irrational denies the group a reasonable degree of agency, and ignores their very strategic employment of violence as a tool of differentiation and ideological out-bidding. Then, using the concept of the existence of a radical milieu, the paper made the argument that ISIS explicitly chose to ignore local communities in favour of broadening their appeal and drawing on transnational support, in stark contrast to how JN has chosen to conduct their campaign. Finally, there was a discussion of this embrace of violence is counterproductive and the paper very briefly highlighted opportunities for members of the anti-ISIS coalition to leverage ISIS's strategic misstep. While the group's rise to power has been frightening and fraught with senseless murder, their intense focus on engaging in, and promoting, extreme violence at the expense of focusing on local concerns will lead to the group's inevitable defeat.

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