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Islamic Extremism 2.0  
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Is ISIS violating the definition terrorism?  
Short Paper 2

ISIS is not reinventing terrorism, it is merely an organization evolved from classical terrorist groups as a result of the opportunity the chaos in Iraq provided, territorial struggles and technological advances. Abu Bakr and his predecessors created a new form of insurgency that mixes terrorist and guerilla elements into an organization that uses terrorist and conventional strategies to spread their control over large territories. Including terrorist acts in their toolset provides ISIS with new tactical options that make them a greater threat to peace.

As we discussed in class terrorism is “a pattern of symbolic violent acts committed with indifference to illegality by a group in pursuit of a cause”, and the definition does not constrain what other activities the organizations indulge in. Terrorism is not Al Qaeda’s only activity, it has an extensive drug business and organized crime network, and until recently, we imagined this to be the only model for a terrorist organisation. ISIS provides a new example of how a terrorist organisation could function with a fundamentally different reason to resort to violence. Al Qaeda uses terrorism as its main tool to reach its ideological goal and finances its operations through side activities. ISIS’s main purpose is to gain control over land and found terrorism a useful tool to recruit new members and to gain tactical advantage. Despite the difference, what matters is the fact that they commit terrorist acts. Therefore the problem is not with the definition of terrorism, but of terrorist groups. In light of ISIS’s emergence, it should mean an organisation whose operations include terrorism. However, the

difference between the styles of operations have wide-ranging effects that makes ISIS a far more destructive organisation.

The most profound difference from classical terrorist organisations is that it has established a ground base and managed to use it for its own advantage. Although “contemporary Al-Shabaab has shifted from the position of a territorial actor towards a deterritorialized organization”, it is good example of a failed attempt for a terrorist organization to establish a territory (Dobos 952). They couldn’t exploit the advantages a base provides, never went global and ended up slowly retracting. ISIS, however, has a strong claim over the land of Syria and Iraq. The land provides them with legitimacy and symbolic power that gives its fighters and potential recruits hope intensifying the belief in the common cause. Being a terrorist group, requires them to learn the most devastating terrorist tactics, that they later have more chances to apply as a result of having to defend its territory and to recruit new members.

In contrast to Al Qaeda, who chooses itself when it engages in a conflict, ISIS has to defend its territories requiring large scale operations that are not afraid to apply the horrible tactics that are usually used to psychologically impact populations such as suicide bombers. Even though these battles are more devastating than most terrorist attacks, they fall outside the definition of terrorism, as the two sides engage in the conflict as governments and their acts carry more than symbolic meaning. On the hand, I would classify as terrorism, when it engages in foreign attacks, since the organization is not in direct conflict with for instance Belgium.

The foreign attacks and propaganda aim to radicalize Muslims and even non-Muslims to win over new soldiers. It is a radical departure from Al Qaeda’s rather vague purpose to create panic, to promote their ideology, to wage a war that remains a few bombings every

year and to show the world that not even the US is invincible. ISIS has a more direct goal, namely to find new recruits and to provoke countries to accept the existence of the Islamic State. This development in the motives behind attacks and the propaganda will have a longer-term impact on foreign countries, if done effectively. For instance, it would take a long time to fix the distrust in society that the potentially radicalized Muslim youth or converts could cause with attacks.

ISIS's biggest achievement is the intensification of global terrorism. Their formula made jihad, the jihadist message and jihadist content on the internet ever more violent and increased the level of horror in the world. Al Qaeda seems to be more cautious with their attacks, while ISIS commanded the Muslims of the whole world to hurt non-believers in any way they can as Al Adnani said "smash his head... or slaughter him with a knife, or run him over..." (Sterner 95). Since ISIS as a large scale organization has more pragmatic reasons to carry out attacks such as recruitment or defending territories, they are significantly more likely to resort to terrible attacks than previous groups with ideological reasons behind their attacks. This is the single most important reason why ISIS is a more dangerous organization than its predecessors.

The question remains: will the ISIS strategy become the new golden standard of terrorism even after its fall, or does ISIS carry in reality the same message as Al Qaeda, but put in a different political context? It remains a puzzle to me whether the success of ISIS discredits Al Qaeda and if people still find its message appealing after seeing the glorious battle ISIS was waging against the West.

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