

Realism, Post-Realism and ISIS

Written by Francis A. Beer and Robert Hariman

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FRANCIS A. BEER AND ROBERT HARIMAN, JAN 17 2018

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International realism has many branches. Beginning with historical thinkers such as Thucydides, Machiavelli, and Hobbes, the realist narrative has swept forward through time to practitioners such as Richelieu, Bismarck, and Kissinger, and writers such as Morgenthau, Waltz, and Mearsheimer. Analysts of realism have grouped contemporary realists into different schools. These include classical realism, traditional realism, neo-realism, neo-classical realism, structural realism, liberal realism, left realism, offensive realism, defensive realism and others (see e.g. Bew 2015; Elman and Jensen 2014). The potential list of realisms seems limited only by the finitude of adjectives.

At the risk of contributing to further theoretical overpopulation, we here present another variant: post-realism. Post-realism begins by anchoring itself in the tenets of traditional realism, and then adjusting them. It adapts historical realism to a contemporary evolutionary path, appropriate for complex globalising society. According to a standard realist narrative, states are the major actors in international relations. They are motivated mainly by interests in maximising power. They extend their domestic monopolies of violence onto anarchical international society through military actions and war. Post-realism does not reject these elements but incorporates them into a larger, more intricate story. Yes, states are substantial, but there are other significant actors. Yes, interests and power matter, but there are other motivations. Yes, military actions and war are important, but there are other noteworthy forms of global action. (cf. Legro and Moravcsik 1999; Beer and Hariman 1996, 2004). In any event, the essential realist narrative, as we understand it, hardly reflects, or even guides, the actual practice of most international relations scholars or the mechanics of actual day-to-day governmental and non-governmental foreign policy operations — political, military, economic, social, cultural, or technological. Here, professionals operate within their own regimes and disciplines, epistemic communities and knowledge-based networks, private languages and political bases. They have their own motivations and worlds of meaning, exercising important policy influence very far from the direct guidance of realist theory (cf. Cross 2013; Haas 1991).

Instead of a reduction to a few variables of states — interests, capability to project power, credibility, and the like — post-realism directs attention to those points where individual actors or the system as a whole may appear less comprehensible or consistent through a traditional realist lens. Post-realism aims to refocus realism with a higher fidelity real-time picture: thicker description, more intricate explanation, more nuanced prediction, and a better toolbox for policy-makers trying to understand and navigate the multifaceted modern world in which we live. Below, we illustrate post-realism's utility using the example of ISIS.

More than States

Post-realism, like realism, begins with states as actors. At the same time, it goes beyond states to include a wide variety of non-state actors within the mix of players on the world stage. These comprise various networks of

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governmental and non-governmental actors combined in supra-national, national, sub-national forms.

One set of such actors include militant groups such as Al Qaeda, Boko Haram, Hamas, Hezbollah, Shabab, the Taliban — and ISIS, the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria, also known by other names including Daesh or ISIL (see Gerges 2016; Nance 2016, 20). We focus specifically on this last group, to which we shall refer as ISIS, which is a multidimensional, quasi-state/national actor. It has its own global, regional, and local networks with links to other networks. It emphasises specific issues; it combines acts of violence against enemies with social services to its clients. It has created a distinctive presence in global media and discussions of foreign policy.

ISIS aspires to be a state; the Islamic State in Syria, Iraq, the Levant, and elsewhere. But it has much larger ambitions. The Caliphate, if successful, would eventually expand to the *ummah*, the entire community of the Islamic faithful. It harkens back to the past as it points toward the future; it is thus pre-national and post-national, pre-colonial and post-colonial, pre-realist and post-realist. In this quest, ISIS aims at continuing the deconstruction and reconstruction of the remains of the old empires. The most immediate target includes the vestiges of the former Ottoman Sultanate. But ISIS also aims to demolish the remains of the Sykes–Picot Agreement of 1916 between Britain and France, with the consent of Russia. This agreement, together with the Balfour Declaration of 1917, from the United Kingdom’s Foreign Secretary Arthur James Balfour to Baron Rothschild, helped establish the political framework ordering the Middle East. Ironically, the successors to the old imperial European states have themselves engaged in their own post-realist rebellion against the Westphalian state system. They have simultaneously hoped to subsume themselves into a larger European supra-national community, and to make all borders more porous for flows of capital, labour, and information. Tribal, national, and post-national domains are thus parallel worlds for ISIS and other actors where post-realism is an emerging common sense.

More than Interest and Power

Post-realism, like realism, suggests that political actors are driven, if they are to survive, by national self-interest defined primarily by considerations of power. Post-realism, however, goes beyond self-interest and power to include many other motivations, goals, and intentions implicit in economics, society, and culture as well as multiple other frames — metaphors and narratives; ideas, ideologies, and identities; mentalities and cognitions; emotions and attitudes — that surround and give meaning to the actions of political leaders. It does so by taking communication seriously: especially the discourses, images, and public arts that constitute collective identity and public opinion. These can be analysed not merely to identify self-interest and perceptions of power and balance, but also to identify multiple other drivers of political action (cf. Rice 2008).

These extended — but not extrinsic — elements of consciousness are evident in the self-definition and scope of ISIS. The organisation invests heavily not only in military but also in media operations. It threatens others not only by territorial conquest, but also through its persuasive reach across continents to hundreds of millions of followers. It is also an economic actor, supervising commercial activity in the sectors that it controls, profiting from a range of industries from oil to drugs, paying its civil servants and soldiers, though not always well. ISIS is finally a social, cultural, and theological actor. It aims at ‘the restoration of an Islamic golden age and a “glorious” new caliphate based on holy war’ (Clarion Project – Harris, 2014).

More than Military Actions

Post-realism, like realism, includes military actions and war. In an anarchic world, violent capabilities are unevenly distributed and there is no universally accepted legitimate political order, no central authority, no governmental monopoly of violence. Force remains a powerful instrument of foreign policy, and ISIS certainly undertakes many military actions that are consistent with the standard realist narrative. Its massed attacks have seized and held territory such as Mosul in Iraq and al-Raqqah in Syria, at least temporarily. Its suicide bombers recall the Japanese kamikaze pilots of World War II. The Western response to ISIS’ use of force also has had a strong military component, including advisors, special forces, drone strikes, conventional air and missile bombardment, and military assistance to allied groups. In domestic settings, standard and special police, counterinsurgency, and intelligence units have conducted operations with varying degrees of armed physical force (see, for example, Hayden 2016).

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For post-realists, as for realists, military action does not exist for its own sake, but is necessarily embedded in a larger political context. In the formulation of the Prussian strategist Carl von Clausewitz (1984, 87), war is not 'a mere act of policy but a true political instrument, a continuation of political activity by other means.' Post-realism embraces a complex politics with a three-tiered model of strategic analysis and political management. First, leaders must compete and cooperate with other political actors to achieve their aims. Second, they must also maintain self-control, managing their own political reputations and identities before many different audiences. Third, leaders must juggle multiple incommensurable political discourses to balance and attain their diverse objectives (Beer and Hariman 1996, 387-414).

Post-realism includes more than military actions. Hard and soft power coexist inside a wider envelope of smart power. The leader's toolbox includes not only conflict but also cooperation, not only physical but also verbal behaviour. Post-realism recognises the need to adapt to the evolving political, economic, social, and technological complexities of asymmetric interaction in physical and media environments, and in cyberspace. A wide variety of modalities — military, political, diplomatic, economic, communicative, rhetorical, and cultural — are available for use.

Diplomacy and Politics

Post-realism follows realism in accepting the unavoidable existence of carefully modulated and targeted military force in dealing with ISIS. But, as Hans Morgenthau long ago emphasised, diplomacy also remains essential in mobilising allies with common interests and values in the Western and Arab worlds. Post-realism follows this thread, but goes beyond it; to state diplomacy, it adds public diplomacy.

Post-realism also asks how the fundamental assumptions of military and political action may be changing. Military action itself has increasingly become a form of politics. As Simpson (2013, 1, 230, 243-4) suggests, war is increasingly a military political hybrid. 'The use of armed force,' he says, 'seeks to establish military conditions for a political solution.' At the same time, armed force 'directly seeks political, as opposed to specifically military, outcomes.' War is less compartmentalised than it used to be. It is 'increasingly merging [...] with regular political activity.' As 'operational military ideas are invested with policy-like quality, we are confronted with policy as an extension of war' rather than war as an extension of policy. War has become 'an interpretive structure, which makes war "itself" a particular political instrument. War offers an interpretive template which can be used [...] to persuade audiences to understand conflict in a [...] "military" way.' Thus, post-realism shifts from simple, reductive models of conflict to understanding that war and politics alike are structured by conflicting category interpretations.

Economics

Post-realism's concern with more than military actions certainly includes economic dimensions. In this, it follows traditional realism's concern with the economic bases of power. In the famous phrase from President Eisenhower's farewell address, the military-industrial complex functions as a blended unit. Economic capabilities seamlessly support military forces. In World War II, for example, American production lines became the 'arsenal of democracy.'

We have already referred to ISIS' range of revenue generating operations. ISIS receives contributions from religiously oriented actors. Further, ISIS is also a business conglomerate. Western military operations — for example, bombing oil facilities and supply lines under ISIS control — have aimed to degrade some of these activities. Beyond this, however, economic sanctions and embargoes have been an important tactical tool. Western domination of the global financial system has also restricted ISIS' capabilities.

A post-realist perspective also suggests the importance of economic incentives in attracting ISIS recruits. Slow and uneven economic development — limited growth and economic inequality — in many parts of the Islamic and Western worlds has left behind a huge mass of unemployed youth susceptible to *jihadi* appeals. *Jihad* is, among other things, a jobs program. Like the Western military, it sucks up unemployed youth, providing economic opportunity, group solidarity, and a mission. Parts of the mission evolve in lands directly under ISIS control; other operations occur in third world or Western territories. No Western strategy for dealing with ISIS can possibly succeed

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over the long term without serious attention to economic growth and employment — particularly youth employment in Islamic, developing, and Western worlds.

Communication and Rhetoric

Post-realism, as a variant of realism, has a distinctive focus on communication and rhetoric (cf. Pinkerton 2011; Der Derian 2009; Hanson 2008). It strongly suggests that realism is limited theoretically and strategically by inattention to discourse, not least its own rhetorical habits. All global actors, including realists, are also rhetorical actors engaged in constant communication with each other. Military success will have limited value and duration unless the many negotiations of cultural identity in the region are addressed, and addressed while being well aware of the cultural and rhetorical problems confronting any reassertion of Western norms. Talk is not cheap.

ISIS is a rhetorical actor and a sophisticated user of social media. Its messaging is highly structured, though subtly differentiated from other groups like al-Qaeda. In a standard militant propaganda script, the enemy is strong, numerous, homogeneous, evil and must be defeated. ISIS suffers tremendously from the enemy in spite of the fact that its leaders and members are virtuous, united, and pure. ISIS can hurt and defeat the enemy by strict religious observance, unity, and violence (see Cohen et al. 2016). ISIS also has its own rhetorical sensitivities. Nance (2016, 428) suggests that 'there are some words that they really hate.' In particular, they abhor the name *Khawarij*, which is the name of 'the first Islamic cult group that the Prophet Mohammed warned against.' And they have rhetorical weaknesses: ISIS has been less successful than some of its competitors in adapting to local vernaculars and pushing a persuasive discourse to specific audiences. Speaking of al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula, Elisabeth Kendall (2015) suggests that:

AQAP's staying power is explained, at least in part, by its production of jihadist narratives that are culturally attuned to their Yemeni context and adapted to prevailing local conditions. ISIS, by contrast, has produced little narrative [...] that is culturally specific to Yemen beyond savaging the Houthis, tribesmen from Yemen's north who swept down through Yemen's south in 2015.

That said, ISIS also employs powerful rhetorical devices, globally broadcasting its ideology and its actions to promulgate its message and attract its followers.

Culture

Post-realism also emphasises the importance of culture. The communicative prowess of ISIS becomes apparent by considering how it is a cultural actor. There are many organisations that offer jobs, social services, and military adventure, but ISIS more than others has forged a transnational, militant, Islamic ideology that has been able to disrupt state and tribal regimes, consolidate and project power, and dominate Western perception of the region. They do so through consistent assertion of a worldview that is irredentist, theocratic, and absolutist, thereby directly tapping the *ressentiment* produced by the failures of modern state-building, secularism, and liberalism in the Middle East. The cultural contestation goes beyond interest to deeper questions of identity and legitimacy, and it goes beyond an analytics of power to turn on images of revenge and visions of the future. The cultural debates occur through words and images across a full range of communication media. These media practices depend on military success but also exceed the scope and outcomes of the battlefield.

Radical Islam pits the *dar al-Islam*, the house of Islam, against the territory of chaos or war. The leading realist of our time, Henry Kissinger, suggests that one of the main global tensions is the conflict between radical Islam, based on this vision, and the Westphalian state-based structure of world order. The continuing viability of the existing state system, in his view, depends on more than the material power of state elites. As the collapse of American foreign policy in Vietnam clearly showed, the exercise of power ultimately depends on the domestic and global legitimacy on which it is perceived to rest. 'To strike a balance between the two aspects of order — power and legitimacy,' Kissinger (2014, 367, 371) says, 'is the essence of statesmanship.'

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Post-realism follows this realist concern and expands it. ISIS simultaneously appears as radically illegitimate within the Western cultural system while also confronting the legitimacy of the system itself. Western leaders must simultaneously oppose ISIS within the existing political order while also defending its cultural values. The apparent illegitimacy of ISIS helps leaders to mobilise popular opposition to it. At the same time, ISIS' outlaw status reduces its legitimacy for outsiders and diminishes the ability of Western leaders to analyse and negotiate interactions short of war. Nuanced Western responses can be perceived as liberal weakness; excessive reactions as imperial hypocrisy and overreach. Post-realism's strategic emphasis on balancing conflict and cooperation, self-presentation, and incommensurable interpretations illuminates the deep cultural tensions embedded in such legitimisation conflicts and the delicacy of responding to them.

Responding to ISIS

Post-realism has a wider-angle lens than realism — including more actors than states, more motivations than interest and power, more actions than military deeds and war. It suggests several additional points of departure for response to the challenge that ISIS poses. These ideas hardly begin to sample possible reactions to ISIS, nor are they unique to post-realism; but they serve as examples of themes that can make more sense when anchored by the conventions of realist analysis and framed alongside them to address circumstances in the 21st century political environment. They include minimising strategic entrapment, developing wider countervailing alliances, and nurturing global civil society and economic development. Finally, they involve opening geographical space to go beyond existing territorial boundaries and opening theoretical space to go beyond realism.

Minimising Strategic Entrapment

Post-realism is concerned with minimising strategic entrapment. ISIS' strategy depends in part on drawing actors into traps, particularly military and rhetorical traps. In either case, extended war becomes more likely: the dynamic of stimulus, response, and escalation suggests caution lest the 'clash of civilisations' take extreme military form. Western framing of the 'global war on terror' or the 'long war' shows that the process of strategic entrapment is already well underway (Bacevich 2016; Doran 2016).

The sharpest provocations are ISIS' savage terrorist assaults on civilians. Journalists accustomed to battlefield immunity are captured and beheaded. Cities that surrender are offered draconian choices. Western states are targeted by terrorists and baited into disproportionate military reprisals. Western electorates under attack become frustrated and fearful, creating opportunities for politicians to make racist statements about all Muslims. Western political and moral assumptions seem no longer to apply.

Although elite analysts are of course aware of these dangers, they may not recognise specific susceptibilities to entrapment in muscular realism. Western political leaders are tempted to respond to ISIS' violent assaults with hard military and police power — iron fists with or without velvet gloves. When bombs or bombers explode, and both domestic and international audiences clamour for a response, realist scripts are activated, and can-do military solutions are easily oversold. The clamour for 'boots on the ground' can soon lead to a large occupying force, which is exactly what ISIS and similar groups would want. Occupation confirms every claim being made about the continued domination of the region by imperial powers enforcing a corrupt and corrupting Western civilisation.

A related temptation is to rationalise invasion and occupation with a familiar realist story line: that current political disorder is due to the imprudent actions of idealists (e.g., policy makers who mistakenly thought that they could create a stable democratic Iraq). This narrative plays into the hands of ISIS by ignoring cultural analysis and accommodation. Reactivating the realist-idealist framework makes it likely that policy makers will become mired in the assumptions of a militaristic realism that would make ISIS stronger, not weaker.

Developing Alliances and Wider Networks

Realists rightly emphasise that the management of power depends on both self-restraint and building alliances with others. Post-realism extends the strong tradition in realist theory toward limits and balancing commitments and

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capabilities in the support of core interests. Military operations are not likely to produce lasting gains otherwise, while alliance reliability depends on granular assessment of all the actors in particular locales. Post-realism confirms the realist's emphasis of analysing all parties in terms of self-interest and power while recognising that self-interest, cultural identity, and power itself are malleable factors within any specific situation.

Alliance building as a force multiplier has been an important element of realist theory and has been effective in rolling back ISIS territorial gains. This is true, not only in the obvious case of Western state cooperation in the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (see Beer 2013), but also with non-Western states in regional and local contexts. Alliance development, however, necessarily goes beyond state cooperation, as military strategies that rely primarily on special forces and advisors require more, not less, interaction with non-state actors. Post-realism emphasises that alliance building requires also working with ethnic, tribal, and religious networks; with NGOs and other actors invested in the region; and with professional knowledge communities to coordinate broad-spectrum resistance to ISIS.

An additional consideration is that ISIS is not disposed toward a politics of alliance building. Their publication *Dabiq*, for example, reveals the weakness of absolutism: it sees far more enemies than friends. Likewise, captive populations are offered only complete ideological capitulation or death; the choice is obvious for most, but also one that depends almost entirely on continued military occupation. ISIS seems to be playing an all-or-nothing game, and in a region and at a time when weak states encourage resurgent identities and local autonomy. In that situation, a new imperial super-state such as a Caliphate is one possibility, but productive alliance building with many different groups for mutual benefits may be harder for ISIS than for many of its opponents.

Nurturing Global Civil Society

Consistent with certain strains of realism focusing on anarchical society, found in the English school of international relations theory (see e.g. Murray 2016; Bull 2012; Manning 1975), we have emphasised a post-realist concern with moving from international disorder to globalising networks: cultivating diplomacy, politics, economic development, communication, and culture. Post-realism also stresses the major importance of nurturing civil society as a response to ISIS and a pathway to finding wider forms of possible attraction and assimilation in an evolving global community.

It seems clear from both its publications and occupying practices that ISIS is dedicated to the destruction of civil society — or at least the liberal democratic civil society that now is established or developing across much of the globe. This is the society of global news media, entertainment, and advertising; of market economics, uniform transportation technologies, and globalised cultures of consumption, and also rule of law, individual liberty, and tolerant civic habits. It is the most direct threat to ISIS, and its central target: first, in the region, but elsewhere as well, as when terrorist actions can degrade social trust, civic habits, and political discourse in Europe and the US. A commitment to the defence of civil society has to be undertaken with care, however, as the same cultural habitus comes with all the baggage of colonial domination, economic exploitation, and assertions of cultural superiority, as well as the destruction of traditional cultures still vitally important in daily life. The post-realist emphasis on reflexive analysis applies directly here.

The focus on civil society encompasses several other post-realist themes that are also relevant to the struggle against ISIS. The distinction between inside/outside, the domestic and the international sphere, obviously is set aside not due to an idealist temperament, but for strategic reasons. Across national boundaries, economic development and corresponding social justice concerns become crucial – and a potential advantage against an adversary whose primary economic opportunity is military service. Although economic progress is not a complete solution, it is essential.

Also important is the reaffirmation of the importance of moral norms in the global environment. The mobilisation against ISIS was provoked not only by its military success but rather by their dramatic overturning of modern conceptions of punishment and human rights. Modern regimes are not innocent, but public celebrations of crucifixion and immolation, and explicit defences of sexual slavery, pitch everyone into a radically different, catastrophically pre-modern world. The choice for Western policy makers at that point is at once clear and dangerous. It is clear, because

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norms are now both salient and powerful means for mobilising the necessary response. It is dangerous, because they can become a trap: an inducement to arrogant, ignorant, overly instrumental and militarised responses sure to provoke uncontrollable blowback. A defence of human rights should not become a license for counterproductive actions.

Opening Theoretical and Geographical Space

Finally, post-realism includes a concern with mentalities beyond national interest and power, indeed beyond realism itself. The response to ISIS could include recognition of what it has forced at great human cost, which is to create an open space for the political imagination. In a region where territorial boundaries seemed both fixed and hopelessly contested, and thus doomed to the stasis of perpetual hostility and hobbled development, ISIS — in realist terms — is a radical revisionist actor. It has shown that another and very different theoretical and geographical map, a new emergent pattern, is at least thinkable.

ISIS has revealed that a productive stability probably needs more than the brokering of existing national interests by outside powers and local elites. This awakening has been purchased at a horrific price — and made worse by the fact that it was unnecessary, had others been willing to do more than manage an impoverished status quo. The vision of modernisation had died — in both its Soviet and American emplotments — but all that had replaced it was the calculation of interests and balancing of power. That is not enough. It never was, nor will be.

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