

Student Feature – Theory in Action: Realism and ISIS

Written by Sandrina Antunes and Isabel CamisãO

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This is adapted from *International Relations Theory* (2017). Get your free copy of the textbook here.

The Islamic State group (also known as IS, Daesh, ISIS or ISIL) is a militant group that follows a fundamentalist doctrine of Sunni Islam. In June 2014, the group published a document where it claimed to have traced the lineage of its leader, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, back to the prophet Muhammad. The group then appointed al-Baghdadi its 'caliph'. As caliph, al-Baghdadi demanded the allegiance of devout Muslims worldwide and the group and its supporters set about conducting a range of extreme and barbaric acts. Many of these were targeted at cities in Western nations such as Melbourne, Manchester and Paris – which has led to the issue becoming a global one. Ultimately, the intent is to create an Islamic State (or Caliphate) in geopolitical, cultural and political terms and to deter (via the use of terrorism and extreme actions) Western or regional powers from interfering with this process. Of course, this means that existing states' territory is under threat. Although the Islamic State group considers itself a state, due to its actions it has been defined as a terrorist organisation by virtually all of the world's states and international organisations. Islamic religious leaders have also condemned the group's ideology and actions.

Introducing realism

Introducing ISIS

Despite it not being an officially recognised state, by taking and holding territory in Iraq and Syria, the Islamic State group clearly possessed aspects of statehood. The major part of efforts to fight the Islamic State group has comprised airstrikes against its positions, combined with other military strategies such as using allied local forces to retake territory (most notably in Iraq). This suggests that war is considered the most effective method of counterbalancing the increasing power of terrorism in the Middle East and neutralising the threat that the Islamic State group poses not only to Western states but also to states in the region. So, while transnational terrorism, such as that practised by the Islamic State group, is a relatively new threat in international relations, states have relied on old strategies consistent with realism to deal with it.

Introducing transnational terrorism

States ultimately count on self-help for guaranteeing their own security. Within this context, realists have two main strategies for managing insecurity: the balance of power and deterrence. The balance of power relies on strategic, flexible alliances, while deterrence relies on the threat (or the use) of significant force. Both are in evidence in this case.

Introducing the balance of power

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First, the loose coalition of states that attacked the Islamic State group – states such as the US, Russia and France – relied on various fair-weather alliances with regional powers such as Saudi Arabia, Turkey and Iran. At the same time, they downplayed the role of international organisations because agreeing action in places such as the United Nations is difficult due to state rivalry. Second, deterring an enemy with overwhelming, superior force (or the threat of it) was perceived as the quickest method to regain control over the territories under Islamic State's rule. The obvious disproportionality of Islamic State's military forces when compared with the military forces of the US, France or Russia seems to confirm the rationality of the decision – which again harks back to realism's emphasis on the importance of concepts like deterrence, but also on viewing states as rational actors. However, the rational actor approach presupposes that the enemy – even if a terrorist group – is also a rational actor who would choose a course of action in which the benefits outweigh the risks.

James Jeffrey and John J. Mearsheimer discuss US foreign policy towards ISIS

Via this point, we can see that while the actions of a terrorist group might appear irrational, they can be interpreted otherwise. From a realist perspective, the Islamic State group, by spreading terror, is using the limited means at its disposal to counterbalance Western influence in Iraq and Syria. The substantial collateral damage of a full military offensive is evidently not a concern for the group's commanders for two main reasons, both of which may serve to enhance their power. First, it would contribute to fuelling anti-Western sentiment throughout the Middle East as local populations become the target of foreign aggression. Second, the feeling of injustice prompted by these attacks creates an opportunity for the spontaneous recruitment of fighters who would be willing to die to validate the group's aims – this is equally true for those within the immediate region and those internationally who fall prey to Islamic State propaganda on the internet.

It is for reasons such as those unpacked in this case, in regions that are as complex as the Middle East, that realists recommend extreme caution regarding when and where a state uses its military power. It is easy when viewing realism to see it as a warmongering theory. For example, on reading the first half of the paragraph above you might feel that realism would support an attack on the Islamic State group. But when you read the second half of the paragraph you will find that the same theory recommends extreme caution.

The key point in understanding realism is that it is a theory that argues that unsavoury actions like war are necessary tools of statecraft in an imperfect world and leaders must use them when it is in the national interest. This is wholly rational in a world where the survival of the state is pre-eminent. After all, if one's state ceases to exist due to attack or internal collapse, then all other political objectives cease to have much practical relevance. That being said, a leader must be extremely cautious when deciding where and when to use military power. It is worth noting that the US invasion of Iraq in 2003, undertaken as part of the Global War on Terror, was opposed by most leading realists (see here) as a misuse of power that would not serve US national interests. This was due to the possibility that the disproportionate use of US military force would cause blowback and resentment in the region. Indeed, in this case, realism yielded strong results as a tool of analysis, as the rise of the Islamic State group in the years after the Iraq invasion demonstrated.

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