ESSAY
Do terrorists dream of rational sheep?
Analysis of “strategic brutality” as a policy solution

Zoltán SZÁSZI

ABSTRACT
For decades, the phenomenon of modern terrorism has been an object of interest for scholars both from the field of Political Science and International Relations Theory. Since the start of the Syrian Crisis, the rise of radical militant factions in Syria and Iraq has been a serious issue. Out of these factions, the most powerful and influential is arguably the organisation named Islamic State. In 2013 the organisation extended its influence over vast territories of Iraq. Since this organisation has the power to destabilize entire nations, occupy territories, control populations and strategic resources, policy makers have to count this faction in their assessment as a formidable non-state actor. This paper aims to analyse a certain (limited) segment of the actions undertaken by the Islamic State in its regional activities to highlight the strategic thinking behind its military operations. The Islamic State relies on „brutality” as a policy tool to gain power and maximize its own utility.

Keywords: Islamic State, non-state actors, rational decision-making
Introduction

Relevance of the topic

For decades, the phenomenon of modern terrorism has been an object of interest for scholars both from the field of Political Science and International Relations Theory. After 9/11, academic discussions focused on the idea that, despite public perception, international terrorist organisations are in fact rational actors that use resources and forces at their disposal to achieve strategic goals. This has been the case with the analysis of Al Qaeda as a power in the international system and the Middle Eastern region.

Since the start of the Syrian Crisis, the rise of radical militant factions in Syria and Iraq has been a serious issue. Out of these factions, the most powerful and influential is arguably the organisation named Islamic State. In 2013 the organisation extended its influence over vast territories of Iraq and claimed authority over the militarist Al-Nusra front leading to its rise to power, although this claim was later disputed.

Since this organisation has the power to destabilize entire nations, occupy territories, control populations and strategic resources, policy makers have to count this faction in their assessment as a formidable non-state actor. Formulating foreign policies that successfully tackle the challenge the Islamic State poses, however, require the strategic observation of the actions undertaken by the organisation.

This paper aims to analyse a certain (limited) segment of the actions undertaken by the Islamic State in its regional activities to highlight the strategic thinking behind its military operations. The Islamic State relies on „brutality” as a policy tool to gain power and maximize its own utility. The concept of „Brutality as a tool” is based on fear mongering by high levels of hostility towards both military targets and civilians. For the sake of academic reasoning, we apply the term strategic brutality to address this hypothesised pattern of rational thinking.
Analysis method

In order to study the impact of the Islamic State and the strategic planning behind its actions, the analysis uses a modelling method. This paper focuses on a limited set of actions conducted by the Islamic State as the goal of the study is not to fully assess the rational nature of the IS or the full extent of its relations in the Middle East and North Africa regional system. Rather, it relies on its limited model to prove rational planning on an operational level and on a regional scale over a certain period of time.

This study does not aim to establish new theories that explain the institutional planning behind international terrorism. On the contrary, it merely adopts the existing academic theories to understand and analyze a small but significant fraction of the undertakings of the Islamic State, as a major actor in the Levant region of the Middle East. In order to do so, we must work with a model that consists of two parts. The first part, IS as an actor, formulates a modelled recreation of the Islamic State. This part is based on theories explaining the behaviour of terrorist organizations and focuses on three key elements that work together to grasp the nature of the Islamic State as a non-state actor in the Middle Eastern system. The second part, Rational Brutality, integrates into the model strategic brutality, as a "policy tool" conducted by the IS to increase its power. This part also focuses on three main elements.

Modelling, as a foreign policy analysis instrument, has its limitations. Instead of dealing with cultural and historical dimensions of the Middle East region, this paper solely focuses on the hard power layer and the politico-economic engine of international actors and the rational planning of their decision-makers. It cannot explain the political, social and cultural nature of the Syrian Crisis nor the shift of powers in the Middle East. The aim is solely to explain the pattern of rational thinking behind certain operations conducted by the Islamic State as a non-state actor.

The Islamic State as an actor

Analysing a terrorist organisation is no simple task. While most scholars agree on the fact that terrorist organisations represent a form
of non-state actors, academic opinions on the patterns of their internal decision-making diverge. From the social science point of view, internal norm creation is very important in terrorist organisations. Although sociological conceptualization of terrorism focuses on norms and perceived normative goals, a wider social science approach also counts in rational utility maximization. In this sense, institutional perception leads to bounded rationality. While sociologists and cultural anthropologists focus on the terrorist’s own perception of utility, social constructivists go as far as to state there is no terrorist action but certain events of political violence conducted by organisations that try to manipulate others’ perception into seeing an image desirable for the political goals of these organisations. From this perspective terrorism is a means of political violence that certain organisations employ to achieve their political goals that maximize their perceived utility, by forcing others’ perception at the same time. This suggests that terrorism is at least as much about influence through manipulation as it is the conventional gaining of power through violence.

Not surprisingly, IR professionals look at international terrorism from less sociology-centered points of view, highlighting threats and viable policy solutions. Certain scholars, looking at the mid-range level of policies, connect terrorism to nonconventional and/or asymmetric warfare. This does not leave much room for interpretations of perception. In this sense, we only see threats and capabilities in the international space of state and non-state actors, whereas policy measures are counterbalancing forces, unconventional warfare included.

In light of these theoretic discourses, we must create a new model of the Islamic State in a way that fits into the already existing conceptual framework of terrorism. Three main elements are required to create this working model of the IS for the sake of the analysis. These are the following: The part that observes the IS as an independent actor, a limited understanding of its internal structure and effectively, the pattern of policy outputs behind the operations in question.
The IS as an independent actor

This element is a formulated observation that, although it undeniably has international ties, the Islamic state functions – at least to a degree – as an independent organisation acting on its own. Two arguments support this claim.

The first argument is that the IS effectively filled a power vacuum in the Levant region of the Middle East. Arguably, the American withdrawal from Iraq already projected the possibility of this power vacuum, as perceived by the US itself through strategic intelligence. During the military campaigns conducted by the organisation in 2013 and 2014, the IS conquered considerable territories in Syria and Iraq, including strategic cities and vast resources.

This has been done using conventional military tactics and not asymmetric warfare, a regular trait of terrorist groups. The Islamic
State employed infiltration and a head-on ground offensive to capture Mosul, the second-largest Iraqi city, showing enough power not to just attack and deal damage in an asymmetric fashion but effectively took control over a city from armed governmental forces. Considering these facts it can be argued that the IS cannot be seen „only” as a conventional domestic or international terrorist group in terms of strategic theories, namely „rational enterprise undertaken by those too weak to organize an armed rebellion” because empirical observations prove that the IS in fact has the capabilities to counter state power with military force, obtain territories, control populations and resources. This effectively makes the IS a full-blown non-state actor in the regional system.

The second argument is that the Islamic State has an operational capability that is at least potentially and partially based on its own, independent resources. While the monetary transactions of the organisation are largely obscure and do not provide enough hard evidence to properly assess the organisation’s level of financial independence, it can be argued that through its operations, IS gained strategic resources on its own that establish a certain level of economic independence. This includes independent monetary funds and other vital resources like supplies, strategic oil fields, and military equipment such as weaponry and vehicles.

This means that even conventional counter-terrorist strategies like the distribution of the international financial support system of the organisation have limited potential for success as the group has arguably achieved a certain level of potential self-sustainability. At this point, this is not only based on military raids but also on controlled resources and population. This means that for the sake of this analysis, we must count on the fact that the IS has the potential for a certain level of economic independence.

**Internal structure**

In order to analyse the decision-making system of the IS, we must first integrate our conceptualisation of this organisation, as a considerably independent actor into a wider IR theoretic background. The shifting balance of the regional system of the Middle East is in
harmony with the neo-classical interpretation of the complex international space and regional systems, and one can argue that the conceptual works on which we base this model fit into the neorealist theories of world politics with bounded rationality as a synthesised concept of the sociological/constructivist interpretation and the IR theory background. It is also clear at this point that we must approach the politico-economic structure of the IS in this section of the model.

The rational nature of the Islamic State is a claim that is based on two arguments. The first argument is that the IS effectively has a politico-economic structure that can only signal a level of professional decision-making based on political and economic rationality. It is a fact, based on various observations that the organisation already has substantial economic power at its disposal. The managing of this economic power in its own is a considerable task. The use of strategic resources, however, to gain power is also entirely politico-economic in nature. This does not only include controlling strategic oil reserves but also control over Syrian electrical plants. The IS was reported to have been selling electricity back to the Assad government in Syria. This feat suggests that the IS seeks economic influence over the country. It also suggests that the organisation relies on its resources to wield a form of economic hard power in the region. This feat requires strategic planning and policy making capabilities, traits of a rational actor.

The second argument is that the Islamic State lacks the social norm creational elements of state actors, especially Western democracies. Thorough observation makes it clear that the IS has a well-organised command structure, with Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi as its top leader with the title emir, born as Ibrahim Awad Ibrahim al-Badri proclaimed by his followers to be Caliph Ibrahim two deputies, a top religious and military council, various administrative compartments and centralised regional authorities. The sources indicate that the IS has a top-down ideological socialization structure instead of a grassroots norm creational system. The centralised local authorities depend on the central administration which is compartmentalised functionally into operational divisions. Comparing this fact with the theoretical background, one can argue that the socio-
economic factors that neoclassical realists borrow from the structuralist, neo-realist approach are not in play in the decision-making of the Islamic State. The IS therefore has the capabilities to act as an international actor but does not have the internal structure and dynamics of a stable state.

Policy outputs

This element of the model focuses on the external side of a rational decision-making structure, the “policy outputs” (the term being employed for a better explanation) of the organisation. It concludes the observation that the IS have been formulating decisions in a well-organised strategic manner in order to maximize utility. Two main arguments support this claim.

The first argument is that the IS effectively adapted different approaches in different “theatres”, (an argument supported by the two previous elements of the model) all falling into a larger strategy orchestrated by the organisation. While it focuses on military operations in the Levant region, the IS relies on conventional social media campaigns to gain influence abroad.\textsuperscript{41, 42} This is arguably conducted based on a rational seek for soft power.\textsuperscript{43} While it is far from a formulated institutional framework for the wielding and channelling of soft power, arguably, this social media campaign, which infiltrates foreign social networks is a well-designed and well-funded policy strategy aimed to gain influence, and through it, increase the influx of foreign fighters to the organisation. This proves that the IS employs various experts in its various operations, aiming for maximal effectiveness through professionalism. This capability for adaptation on the operational level highlights the rational decision-making pattern in formulated policy outputs.

The second argument is that in developing strategies, the IS relies on violence and fear-mongering as an effective policy tool. It is based on rational calculations rather than irrational normative considerations. Fear-mongering has been theorised as a policy solution before \textsuperscript{44, 45} and arguably, this policy tool has been used by the IS to reach its strategy goals. (This will be further discussed in the next chapter.) The beheadings of Western individuals, for instance,
have been conducted locally, with a massive media campaign built around them, orchestrated in a way to reach maximum penetration. Consequences of Rational Brutality

In the second part of the model we discuss “brutality as a tool” conducted by the IS on an operational level in Iraq and Syria, effectively, the Levant region. Two main elements are important for the assessment of this strategic brutality, namely, the influx of support for the Islamic State and the increase of influence in the system.

Influx of support

To understand the logic of the brutal behaviour of the IS, we must see how it is a rational choice on the part of the decision-maker. As we discussed Mearsheimer’s understanding of lying as a policy option, we saw that lies can be used for “fear-mongering”, inserting the element of shock and fear into domestic or foreign societies. Mearsheimer makes his case by pointing out the “fear-mongering” elements behind Western military interactions. In this analysis, we use the same argument with the IS, stating that through fear-mongering, the organisation gained massive support from the societies it operates in. Two arguments support this claim.

The first argument is that the IS effectively uses fear to force support from the populations they control. Applying Mearsheimer’s understanding of fear-mongering here it is used for the extortion of civilians. As we have established the rational decision-making of the IS before, brutality as a tool is a very pragmatic instrument for effective local terrorisation. The IS aims to gain funds, resources, supplies from the local population and wives for its militants through forced marriage. Brutal actions merely set an example to highlight the possibility of torture and murder as a worse scenario as opposed to cooperation. Fear-mongering uses the better scenario/worse scenario dichotomy to reach its goals and the IS’ “policy” does exactly that.
The idea to connect brutal extortion with rational gains is not a new one. This analysis is not the first to explain seemingly senseless violence with utility maximization. Academics have theorized in the past that, a rebel or militant group tends to employ violence to force the local population to cooperate. Extortion is in fact a long-term strategy to ensure the cooperation of the local community. Applying the same academic reasoning in this case suggests that the local operations of IS are not unique in their nature, rather, they fit into a behavioral pattern of militant factions that prey on their local communities. This is in accordance with empirical observations regarding the material gains of IS through its hostilities against the civilian population.

The second argument supporting the claim that brutality increases local support is that it connects to radical elements in the polarized societies it operates in. As we discussed before, this model leaves out the cultural layer of societies. Therefore, sectarian infighting and religious hostility cannot be discussed in the analysis. Polarization, however, has been increasing in Iraq and Syria as a socio-cultural tendency reaching into every level of their societies. Polarization therefore will only be discussed here as a purely political phenomenon of polarized groups of societies opposing each other ultimately leading to armed atrocities. In this sense, it is arguably a rational choice for any militant faction to connect with one of these groups and gain support through their alliance while forcing the same support out of others. Empirical observation proves that for at least a short period of time the IS received voluntary support from certain communities in the societies it operates in. Analysing the long-term productivity of the dependence on voluntary support of the Islamic State is hard. The available data only suggests an initial increase of support towards the organisation during late spring and summer 2014, during and after the capture of Mosul by the Islamic State. Further observation of the continuity of voluntary support of the IS by certain factions is impossible due to the obscurity of available data and the fact that without the cultural elements, this model cannot analyse the long-term mechanisms of the regional societies.
Increase of influence

The Islamic State is a unique phenomenon in its region because it is a non-state actor that undoubtedly possesses some state-like elements, like territoriality. Arguably, another element is influence in the regional system. Although the role of influence originates in the neoliberal interpretation of soft power, it is not alien in the neoclassical realist conceptual framework that this paper is based on. In a theoretic approach, the influence the IS strives for through violent means is a shift in the relation of relative powers. In this sense, brutality shocks the societies the IS operates in and it increases its relative military power compared to its adversaries through the increase in its efficiency and the decrease of efficiency in theirs. Two arguments support this claim.

The first argument is that strategic brutality has a severe domestic shocking effect that decreases the efficiency of the power of state actors. The pieces at play here are the IS forces and the opposing regular armies. Cities and populations are valuable resources in the hands of the opposing factions. Increased efficiency of the IS through its violent means on an operational level means that the IS forces have to advance at a faster pace that what the power of their state adversaries would dictate. The available evidence is in line with that projection. The Iraqi chief command has to deal with low morale and combat readiness, a very inefficient state of their army despite their superiority in numbers and military hardware. On the operational level, this proves that the brutality the IS employs leads to their increased efficiency, which increase is reversely proportional to that of their state adversaries.

The second argument is that employing brutality as a strategic tool is not only efficient against state actors with regular armies but it is also effective against rival non-state military factions. The strongest adversary of the IS in the region is arguably the terrorist organisation Al-Qaeda. This group is widely spread and well-connected but scarce, with no observable control over territory, population or strategic resources, which the IS has. Observations suggest that during the spring and summer of 2014, the IS swiftly captured territories, populations, cities and resources that gave them a strategic advantage over Al-Qaeda very early in their campaign.
These quick victories followed a series of violent and brutal actions. This suggests that an early advancement and capture of strategic locations and resources by military operations is crucial and due to their brutal means, the campaign conducted by the IS placed the Al-Qaeda at a great disadvantage. The IS effectively gained more state-like elements, like territoriality, control of populations and resources. This means that the organisation could set foot as a considerable non-state actor immensely more powerful in the Levant region than the Al-Qaeda network.

Conclusion

Terrorism has been a much debated and studied topic for decades and yet there still are new issues that policy makers have to address and academists have to study. The purpose of this paper was to observe and analyse one of these new problems connected to the ever-present threat of global terrorism.

We are all standing on the shoulders of giants. Scholars of Political Science and International Relations Theory have been researching the phenomenon that is international terrorism and the rationality behind it since 2001. This paper aims to use their academic tools to observe and analyse the rationality behind the choice of brutality as a policy solution by the terrorist organisation called the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria.

The analysis used sociologic and cultural anthropologic conceptualisation and integrated it into an IR framework based on a neo-classical realist theoretic approach to study brutality, as a policy choice by the IS. In order to do so, we used the modelling method and focused on the operational level of the organisation’s “policy” and observing only the operations conducted in the Levant area by the organisation from 2013 to 2014. The two parts of the model, a chapter discussing the independent actor nature of the IS and one covering strategic brutality as a policy instrument, came to the conclusion that brutality was not only a rational choice but also a very effective way to gain power in the region. The evidence suggests that based on their operations confined to the Levant, the IS has a rational decision-making structure, which, combined with its state-like elements,
makes it a powerful and threatening actor of the region. It is at least to a level, independent, although its economic background is somewhat obscure due to the lack of data in certain aspects, like funding and monetary transactions. It is, however, clear that they operate on their own with a great efficiency, thus traditional counter-terrorist operations will remain ineffective. It is clear that there is no easy way out of the situation. The complex issues of the region need strategic planning. Tackling the threat of a powerful non-state actor like the Islamic State is challenging, as there is no quick solution for solving the problem. The Islamic State is, after all, an intelligent disaster.
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The author discusses sectarian infighting in Iraq – Which will not be further discussed in this analysis since the model removes the cultural layer of the region. However, the author also points out the Iraqi policy making mistakes that lead to the success of the IS in northern Iraq. This explanation suggests a conventional politico-military power shift in the regional balance of power.


Filmed by videojournalist Medyan Dairieh, this piece by Vice News covers both daily activities in IS-controlled territories and first-hand battlefield reports. The observations in this video support the claim that IS forces advanced in Iraq through regular and militia tactics, and not conventional terrorist asymmetric warfare.


A detailed report of the capture of Mosul documents that after fighting between militants and governmental forces broke out, the Islamic State launched a head-on charge in the vicinity of the city. Their forces have already infiltrated the city and vehicles carrying armed men also crossed the Syrian border.


The article highlights a certain controversy behind the IS-lead bank heist in Mosul that implicates ties between the organisation and the Iraqi government. These allegations cannot be analyzed in
this paper due to the lack of hard evidence. This means that the argument that states that the IS is financially independent can only lead so far as to conclude that the organisation possesses some level of economic independence. This however, is enough for the sake of this paper as we only observe the independent actions of IS on an operational level.


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