



Revolution and world order: the case of the Islamic State (ISIS)

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Abstract

Scholars have studied revolutions mostly as domestic events while neglecting their transnational character. From the French to the Chinese Revolution, revolutionary ideologies and networks have never been confined to national boundaries. As transnational events, revolutions can create ruptures in global politics and challenge world order. Some young revolutionary states have perished. Others such as Iran have endured, but tensions persist. Given the importance of the topic, the literature is surprisingly limited. We propose a theoretical framework that explains the evolution of the relationship between anti-Western revolutionary states and the global order and apply it to the case of the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS). Our framework explains why some revolutionary states are accommodated or tolerated, whereas others are opposed, isolated, and destroyed. Using the Islamic State to illustrate our framework, we explain the main reason for the demise of the Islamic State (ISIS): its own radicalism.

Keywords Communism · Islamism · Islamic State · Revolution · World order

Introduction

Scholars have studied revolutions mostly as domestic events while neglecting their transnational character. From the French to the Chinese Revolution, revolutionary ideologies and networks have never been confined to national boundaries. Revolutionaries commonly rely on or seek to cultivate foreign allies to counter their domestic and foreign enemies. As transnational events, revolutions can create ruptures in

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global politics and challenge world order.¹ In fact, the outlook of most twentieth-century revolutions was hostile to the existing world order, viewed as being dominated by the secular, capitalist West.² They were indeed frequently treated by the West with suspicion and hostility, either out of ignorance or its own ideological biases. The birth of a revolutionary state almost inevitably triggered not only violent domestic conflicts but also interstate wars started either by itself or by others. Some young revolutionary states (Taliban Afghanistan and Khmer Rouge Cambodia) have perished in wars.³ Others endure and adjust over time, but tensions have persisted for decades as in the case of Cuba and Iran.

Given the importance of the topic, the literature is surprisingly limited.⁴ An undeveloped and minority position in International Relations studies claims that revolutionary states are bound to adapt to and accept the global system either because of systemic pressures from the system or through the process of socialization. The majority of scholars, especially but not exclusively those who actually study revolutionary movements in depth, take a much more pessimistic attitude. In this view which we call “apocalyptic,” immediate conflicts and long-term tensions appear inevitable following the birth of a revolutionary state. An apocalypse in the sense of a massive destruction of human lives is quite possible, as the case of the Cuban missile crisis attested. The likelihood of apocalypse is arguably even higher today given the spread of nuclear technologies and many kinds of weapons of mass destruction.

¹ World order is defined by its relatively stable distribution of capabilities, its dense networks of alliances, and its well-established international norms, laws, and institutions.

² “The West” can be understood broadly as comprising countries in Western Europe and North America that are economically capitalist and culturally secular. We do not assume that the West is monolithic and will discuss the implication of this later.

³ The Taliban has since revived as a guerrilla movement but it remains to be seen whether they will be able to restore their revolutionary state in Kabul.

⁴ Major works include: George Lawson, “Revolutions and the International,” *Theory and Society* 44: 4 (2015), 299–319; Jeff Colgan, “Domestic Revolutionary Leaders and International Conflict,” *World Politics*, 65: 4 (2013), 656–690; Fred Halliday, *Revolution and World Politics: the Rise and Fall of the Sixth Great Power* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1999); Mark Katz, *Revolutions and Revolutionary Waves* (London: Macmillan, 1997); Robert S. Snyder, “The U.S. and Third World Revolutionary States: Understanding the Breakdown in Relations,” *International Studies Quarterly* 43: 2 (1999): 265–290; Stephen Walt, *Revolution and War* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1996); Patrick Conge, *From Revolution to War: State Relations in a World of Change* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1996); J. D. Armstrong, *Revolution and World Order: The Revolutionary State in International Society* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993); Theda Skocpol, “Revolutions and Mass Military Mobilization,” *World Politics* 40: 2 (1988), 147–168; Peter Calvert, *Politics, Power, and Revolution: An Introduction to Comparative Politics* (Brighton, Sussex: Wheatsheaf Books, 1983); and Kyung-won Kim, *Revolution and the International System* (New York: New York University Press, 1970). Earlier works, such as Martin Wight, *Power Politics*, eds. Hedley Bull and Carsten Holbraad (New York: Holmes & Meier Publishers, Inc., 1978), 81–94; and James Rosenau, *International Aspects of Civil Strife* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1964) discussed but not focused solely on the issue. Two important works by the same author who focuses in part on transnational revolutionary networks and on the West’s relationship with radical movements (including political Islam) are John M. Owen IV, *Confronting Political Islam: Six Lessons from the West’s Past* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2010); *idem.*, *The Clash of Ideas in World Politics: Transnational Networks, States, and Regime Change, 1510–2010* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2010).



While such likelihood is acknowledged, we focus on the possibilities and conditions for the world order to transcend the challenges by revolutionary states. We argue that the evolution of the relationship between the global order and revolutionary states is fundamentally shaped by three logics: (1) whether the revolutionary state is itself a big power or has a big power as its patron⁵; (2) how much its revolutionary values have in common with Western values; and (3) how radical the revolutionary state is, as measured by its leaders' attitudes toward the pace of desirable revolutionary changes and the use of violence, and by their ambition to lead the global revolutionary movement.

In particular, we argue that (1) the existence or involvement of a big power on the revolutionary side of the relationship increases the likelihood of a revolutionary state being accommodated or tolerated by the *status quo* world order; (2) the more shared values a revolutionary state has with the West, the more likely it is for the Western-dominated world order to eventually accommodate it; and (3) the more the leaders of a revolutionary state are impatient for change, predisposed to violent tactics, and ambitious to lead globally, the more difficult for the existing world order to accommodate them, and the likelier their fanaticism will eventually destroy the revolutionary state.

It is claimed that these three logics (power capabilities, shared values, self-destruction) will explain why some revolutionary states are accommodated or tolerated (in some cases despite persistent tensions), whereas others are opposed, isolated, and destroyed. In either case, that is how the existing world order eventually transcends revolutionary states.

In the rest of the paper, we will first present the conceptual framework and then discuss the Islamic State to illustrate our arguments. At its core, the Islamic State (ISIS) is an Iraq-based revolutionary movement seeking to establish a state and a radically new or transformed world order.⁶ At its peak in 2014, ISIS came close to becoming a state under a revolutionary regime that performed many essential economic and administrative functions over millions of subjects. In this sense, it is comparable to the Russian, Chinese, Cuban, and Iranian revolutionary states. Like communist revolutions, ISIS is not contained within the territories of Iraq and Syria but is a node in the global network of radical Islamist movement spreading from Western Africa to Central Asia. Like the Soviet Union that claimed leadership of all working class's movements around the world, ISIS also claims to be a caliphate leading all Muslims regardless of their nationalities. In this sense, ISIS is truly transnational. However, ISIS differs from the communist revolutions in major ways, and our logics explain the reasons for its now imminent demise.

⁵ A "big power" is defined here as a country of large size and population such as Russia and China.

⁶ We are not the first to treat ISIS as a revolutionary state or regime. See, for example, Stephen Walt, "ISIS as Revolutionary State," *Foreign Affairs* 94: 6 (Nov/Dec 2015), 42–51; Brian Mello, "The Islamic State: Violence and Ideology in a Post-Colonial Revolutionary Regime," *International Political Sociology* 12 (2018), 139–155.



Apocalyptic perspective and the three logics for transcendence

This section first discusses the apocalyptic perspective before presenting our arguments about transcendental conditions. The apocalyptic perspective predicts that the birth of a revolutionary state is very likely to trigger a clash of civilizations and an interstate conflict—if not immediately, then soon afterward.⁷ Revolutionary states are born out of revolutionary movements that aspire to carry out extensive and profound social and cultural changes once having achieved political power.⁸ The kind of changes many revolutionary states pursue—for example, the abolition of private property or the full application of Sharia law—is so radical that they can be said to amount to the creation of a new civilization. The clash of civilizations (in the ideological, not cultural sense à la Huntington) triggered by a revolution is not necessarily confined to the domestic realm. Revolutionary states often embraced a Manichean worldview that sharply divided the world in “us” versus “them,” and anticipated a clash between the two. For example, Vietnamese communists deeply believed in a worldview that divided the world into two camps: the revolutionary camp led by the Soviet Union and the imperialist camp led by the USA⁹ Likewise, Ayatollah Khomeini viewed the global order as comprising the “oppressed,” which were victims of Western imperialism, and the “oppressors,” which were imperialist powers (including both the USA and the Soviet Union). He called for all Muslims—Sunni or Shi’ite—to unite against the West.¹⁰

As Halliday argues, no clear separation exists between the domestic and the international spheres for revolutionary thoughts; whatever their particular national or internal origins, all past revolutionary ideologies not only called for a new domestic order but also claimed the salience of their vision for the international sphere.¹¹ Claims of global relevance by revolutionaries were not made arbitrarily but based on a coherent logic. Revolutions legitimized themselves by appealing to abstract and universal principles such as freedom, independence, dignity of the people, and proletarian justice. These principles and values were obviously not limited by national boundaries. From the Vietnamese to the Iranian Revolution, part of revolutionary discourses also evoked the fraternity and peace between nations and peoples.

⁷ Western powers may be hostile to radical revolutions but they have not automatically and immediately opposed every revolution because they might lack one or a combination of the following factors: information (the U.S. in regard to Fidel Castro in 1959 and in Iran in 1979), interest (the U.S. regarding Ho Chi Minh in 1945 and regarding the Taliban in 1996), or power (the U.S. in regard to Chinese communists in 1949).

⁸ For similar definitions, see Halliday, *Revolution and World Politics*, 21; Walt, *Revolution and War*, 12–14; Goodwin does not view revolutionary movements as necessarily aspiring to radical social and cultural changes. Jeff Goodwin, “Revolutions and Revolutionary Movements,” in Thomas Janoski et al., *The Handbook of Political Sociology* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 404–405.

⁹ Tuong Vu, *Vietnam’s Communist Revolution: The Power and Limits of Ideology* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2017).

¹⁰ Ray Takeyh, *Guardians of the Revolution: Iran and the World in the Age of the Ayatollahs* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 18–22.

¹¹ Halliday, *Revolution and World Politics*, 58–59.



Enemies of revolutions were perceived not within national boundaries but on the global scale, whether as imperialists or infidels.

Given their definition of enemy, one should expect revolutionary states to export revolution abroad if they had the opportunity to do so.¹² Moscow created the Third Communist International (Comintern) in 1919, a mere 2 years after the Russian Revolution, to lead communists worldwide in their quest to seize power. Cuba followed the Soviet model with the Organization of Solidarity with the People of Asia, Africa, and Latin America (OSPAAAL), although this one was short-lived.¹³ Khomeini declared that Iran's mission was "to liberate the discontented masses of Muslims whether they live in the independent states of Egypt, Saudi Arabia, and Morocco or under non-Islamic government."¹⁴ Khomeini's Islamic Republic indeed supported Islamist causes in Afghanistan, Lebanon, Iraq, and elsewhere.¹⁵ In the 1920s, Ho Chi Minh worked tirelessly for the Comintern to organize or promote revolutions not only in Indochina but also in southern China, Siam, and British Malaya.¹⁶ Postwar Vietnam trained sappers for, and sent surplus weapons to, Algeria, Chile, and El Salvador in service of revolutions there.¹⁷

Claiming to represent universal values that apply not only domestically but also internationally, revolutionary states pose a challenge to the existing world order and the principles underlying it.¹⁸ Since at least the nineteenth century, world order has been based on the Westphalian state system composed of nation states which normally interact based on an evolving yet mutually agreed upon set of international norms and rules about sovereignty, territory, and diplomacy.¹⁹ However, many

¹² As Halliday states, "much as revolutionary states may deny it and [their] liberal friends downplay it, the commitment to the export of revolution, i.e., to the use of the resources of the revolutionary state to promote radical change in other societies, is a constant of radical regimes." *Ibid.*, 99.

¹³ Owen, *The Clash of Ideas in World Politics*.

¹⁴ Cited in Takeyh, *Guardians of the Revolution*, 20.

¹⁵ Mohsen Milani, *The Making of Iran's Islamic Revolution: From Monarchy to the Islamic Republic* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1988), 308.

¹⁶ Sophie Quinn-Judge, *Ho Chi Minh: The Missing Years 1919–1941* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002); Thomas Engelbert and Christopher Goscha, *Falling out of Touch: A Study on Vietnamese Communist Policy towards an Emerging Cambodian Communist Movement, 1930–1975* (Clayton, Vic., Australia: Centre of Southeast Asian Studies, Monash University, 1995); Christopher Goscha, "Vietnam and the World Outside: The Case of Vietnamese Communist Advisers in Laos (1954–1962)," *South East Asia Research*, Vol. 12, No. 2 (July 2004), pp. 141–185; *idem.*, *Thailand and the Southeast Asian Networks of the Vietnamese Revolution, 1885–1954* (Richmond: Curzon Press, 1999).

¹⁷ Merle Pribbenow, "Vietnam Covertly Supplied Weapons to Revolutionaries in Algeria and Latin America." Cold War History Project e-Dossier No. 25, 2 November 2011. <http://www.wilsoncenter.org/publication/e-dossier-no-25-vietnam-covertly-supplied-weapons-to-revolutionaries-algeria-and-latin> (accessed 8 May 2016); Merle Pribbenow, "Vietnam Trained Commando Forces in Southeast Asia and Latin America." Cold War History Project e-Dossier No. 28, 3 January 2012. <http://www.wilsoncenter.org/publication/e-dossier-no-27-vietnam-trained-commando-forces-southeast-asia-and-latin-america> (accessed 8 May 2016).

¹⁸ Armstrong, *Revolution and World Order*, 3.

¹⁹ Stephen Krasner, however, views the so-called Westphalian order as a mere "organized hypocrisy." See Krasner, "Rethinking the sovereign state model," in Michael Cox, Tim Dunne, and Ken Booth, eds. *Empires, Systems and States: Great Transformations in International Politics* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 17–42.



revolutionary states have rejected the primacy of those norms and preferred a global order based on the notion of a “great community” united by shared identity, whether Muslim or communist.²⁰ The ensuing clash of civilizations is based on alternative concepts of the global order, not simply between states with conflicting strategic or security interests. As Robert Jervis observes, “Revolutionaries rarely have small ideas, and big ones are almost always disruptive internationally.”²¹

The clash of civilizations across national borders does not mean war even though the worldview of many revolutionaries anticipated inevitable war with their ideological enemies. Revolutionary states may usher in decades of tension in world politics such as the Cold War when there were no direct confrontations but localized wars, low-key conflicts, and persistent frictions. As Martin Wight argues, a “revolutionary power is morally and psychologically at war with its neighbors all the time, even if legally peace prevails, because it believes it has a mission to transform international society by conversion or coercion, and cannot admit that its neighbors have the same right to continue existence which it assumes for itself.”²² Reviewing European/world history since the sixteenth century, Wight concludes that “unrevolutionary international politics should [hardly] be regarded as more normal than revolutionary, since the history of international society has been fairly equally divided between the two.”²³

The close relationship between revolution and war described by Wight needs not be restricted to the great revolutions. A large sample in one study shows that states that undergo a “revolutionary” regime change are twice as likely to be involved in war as those where changes are “evolutionary.”²⁴ Many revolutionary states were barely established when they became embroiled in war with other states. Communist North Korea launched a war to conquer the South less than 2 years after foreign forces had left the peninsula. Iran was attacked by Iraq a year after the revolution, and war would last nearly a decade. Armed clashes between Cambodian and Vietnamese communist forces took place right after both won their civil wars. Four years later, Vietnam invaded Cambodia while itself was invaded by China.

As the examples indicate, revolutionary states not always started war. Rather, counterrevolutionary and other states were the culprits in some cases. Counterrevolutionary states may react with hostility to the success of a revolution because they fear the spread of revolution to their own states, or because they simply cannot tolerate an external threat to their values. A successful revolution may upset or threaten to upset the balance of power between the revolutionary and counterrevolutionary camps, leading to external intervention by counterrevolutionary states.²⁵

²⁰ See Armstrong, *Revolution and World Order*, chapter 1, for discussion of alternative concepts of world order.

²¹ Robert Jervis, “Socialization, Revolutionary States and Domestic Politics,” *International Politics* 52: 5 (2015), 609–616.

²² Wight, *Power Politics*, 90.

²³ *Ibid.*, 92.

²⁴ Walt, *Revolution and War*, 1, citing Zeev Maoz.

²⁵ Walt, *Revolution and War*.



War between revolutionary states and their neighbors can also occur for various non-ideological reasons.²⁶ For example, the neighboring country may see an opportunity to settle longstanding territorial disputes or other old grudges between the two countries. This kind of war may have little to do with ideology, but it may help strengthen the revolutionary state or at least the most radical or militant faction in the government, as this state mobilizes people for war.²⁷ This was the case with the Iran–Iraq war: Khomeini and his supporters seized the opportunity to defeat their Marxist rivals and the moderate faction in the revolutionary coalition. The war helped consolidate the power of the radical clerics behind Khomeini. As revolutionaries are particularly skilled at mobilizing the masses for war,²⁸ war in turn grows the capabilities of revolutionary states as players in world politics. The historian Pierre Razoux argues that the Valmy effect²⁹ was a great benefit to the Iranians during the Iran–Iraq War. Iranian leadership could exploit not only the Iranian sense of patriotism, but could stress that their sacrifice was needed to ‘save the endangered nation’ and to ‘save the revolution’ from foreign intervention.³⁰

Revolutionaries do not fear war even though they may not relish it. As a rule, martyrdom is glorified in revolutionary states. Iranians were told by their leaders that the Iraqi invasion offered them a great opportunity to claim a special place in the kingdom of God by sacrificing themselves at the battlefield.³¹ “As soon as the news of the Iraqi invasion spread through the country, tens of thousands of volunteers rushed to the recruitment offices to sign up with the revolutionary guards,” writes Razoux. Many of the volunteers boarded buses immediately upon joining and headed to the front, “armed only with good will, courage, and the light weapons the Pasdaran were willing to give them.”³² In Vietnam, Ho Chi Minh reportedly told the French in 1946 that “you can kill 10 of my men for every one I kill of yours, yet even at those odds, you will lose and I will win.”³³ During the Vietnam War, North Vietnam in fact suffered one million casualties out of a population of about 20 million.

Apocalypse is possible precisely because revolutionaries do not fear war and are willing to accept any consequences. For nearly 2 weeks in October 1962, the world came close to a nuclear war in what would be known as the Cuban missile crisis. Previously, atomic bombs had been considered for possible use by other American presidents in China, Korea, and Vietnam, but it was in Cuba that a small

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Robert Snyder emphasizes domestic politics as a major cause of wars initiated by revolutionary states. See Snyder, “The U.S. and Third World Revolutionary States”.

²⁸ Theda Skocpol, “Revolutions and Mass Military Mobilization,” *World Politics* 40: 2 (1988), 147–168.

²⁹ The Valmy Effect is in reference to the Battle of Valmy in 1792. French revolutionaries beat a counter revolutionary coalition and ‘saved’ the revolution and republic.

³⁰ For a discussion of this dynamic in the case of the Iran–Iraq War see Pierre Razoux, *The Iran–Iraq War* (Harvard University Press, 2015), specifically chapter 8.

³¹ Takeyh, *Guardians of the Revolution*, 88.

³² Razoux, *The Iran–Iraq War*, 121–122.

³³ According to Stanley Karnow who does not cite any sources, Ho said the above to a French visitor. Stanley Karnow, *Vietnam, a History* (New York: Viking Press, 1983), 197–198. The authenticity of this statement cannot be verified.



revolutionary state brought the two superpowers to the brink of mutual destruction for the first time. Maurice Halperine, a journalist who was in Cuba during the crisis, found young Cuban men and boys wearing butcher knives and sporting machetes, preparing to fight hand-to-hand in the case of an US invasion. Halperine notes that the men and boys were apparently indifferent to the fact that, in the case of a nuclear exchange, they would be “blown to bits by an invisible enemy.”³⁴ Apocalypse was avoided when the Soviet leader Khrushchev eventually withdrew the missiles over the objection of Castro and many of his own comrades in the Soviet leadership.

Although apocalypse is not an idle threat to humanity, we believe that it is possible for world politics to transcend revolutionary challenges. Yet the International Relations literature on this topic is thin and undeveloped. Dominant theoretical schools do not pay much attention to revolutionary states. On the surface, the concept of “socialization” in the literature may sound useful.³⁵ Neorealists assume that the anarchic system of states creates pressure on all states, especially those with less power and capability, to be “socialized” into it over time—meaning to adopt similar behavior to each other.³⁶ Constructivists also predict that socialization will take place over time as states interact with each other in the international institutions that they join, and as they internalize the norms and values of those institutions.³⁷ “The concept of “socialization” is proposed for all states and is intuitively and empirically applicable to revolutionary states. However, since the concept is created for all states, its usefulness for revolutionary ones is quite limited.

Although all revolutionary states have showed greater tolerance and acceptance of the international order over time, they vary widely. A quarter century after the Cold War ended with the collapse of the Soviet bloc, Cuba just recently normalized relations with the USA, but bilateral relations remain tense.³⁸ Vietnam remains close to its former communist brothers Russia, China, and Cuba despite having normalized relations with the USA³⁹ These small or medium-sized countries are most susceptible to systemic pressure, but they have tended to follow the dictates of their ideology rather than the push and pull of the system for socialization. Iran and Vietnam have joined many international institutions, but a significant faction in the leadership has refused to abandon their loyalty to the revolutionary ideology or mindset.⁴⁰

³⁴ Maurice Halperin, *The Rise and Decline of Fidel Castro: An Essay in Contemporary History* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1972), 191.

³⁵ For a thorough discussion of the literature on socialization, see Alastair Ian Johnston, *Social States: China in International Institutions, 1980–2000* (Princeton University Press, 2008), 1–20; on Iran’s failure to socialize, see Maximilian Terhalle, “Revolutionary Power and Socialization: Explaining Revolutionary Zeal in Iran’s Foreign Policy,” *Security Studies* 18: 3 (2009), 557–586.

³⁶ Kenneth Waltz, *Theory of International Relations* (New York: Addison Wesley, 1979), 128. Alastair Ian Johnston argues that what Waltz means is not “socialization” but “homogenization.” See Johnston, *Social States*, 3.

³⁷ See Johnston, *Social States*, 15–17.

³⁸ Obviously the U.S. is partially to be blamed for the tensions, but Cuban leaders are not innocent either.

³⁹ Vu, *Vietnam’s Communist Revolution*, ch. 10.

⁴⁰ For Iran, see Terhalle, “Revolutionary Power and Socialization;” for Vietnam, see Vu, *Vietnam’s Communist Revolution*.



These cases suggest that “systemic pressures” and “socialization” do not go very far in explaining the behaviors of revolutionary states.

Building on but going beyond existing scholarship, we propose three key logics to assess how revolutionary states likely evolve in their relationship with the *status quo* world order that they oppose. These logics do not cover every dynamic of the relationship, but we believe they make up an essential set of tools to guide such assessments.

The first logic concerns the power capabilities possessed by revolutionary states measured primarily by the size of the territory and population they control or have access to. Of course, thanks to their ability to appeal to martyrdom, the capabilities of revolutionary states to mobilize people’s passion and wreak havoc on their enemies often exceed the limits imposed by the size of the population under their control. The September 11, 2001, attacks by a mere dozen Al-Qaeda men that killed thousands of Americans are an example of such outsized capabilities. In the long term, however, size remains decisive. Another factor that may affect the power capabilities of a particular revolutionary state is whether its enemies are united as a bloc in facing it. Western countries and their allies in other regions may not share the same interests in suppressing a particular revolutionary state. For example, US embargo of Iran has frequently been violated by its allies.

According to the logic of power capabilities, if a revolutionary movement succeeds in taking power in a big country such as Russia and China, it is more likely to be accommodated by the global order, other things being equal. Even though the Western states that dominate world order may try to intervene militarily to reverse the outcome, they are likely to fail since revolutionaries have great resources at hand to mobilize. Once the revolutionary state *cum* big power has been consolidated, the West is bound to accept it because ignoring it is impossible while acceptance can at least give Western states some leverage. Once accepted by the West as its equal, the revolutionary state has an incentive to socialize into the existing global order so that it can acquire the status, privileges, and material benefits great powers are entitled to in that order.

This logic of power capabilities applies to a lesser extent to those small revolutionary states. Within some limits, even small revolutionary armies may also deter Western intervention if Western countries are not willing to accept the likely high casualties inflicted by revolutionary martyrs. If a small revolutionary state enjoys the support of a big power (presumably one that shares the same revolutionary ideology), it would be even more difficult for Western states to crush it by military means because its big brother would not sit idly by, whether out of ideological solidarity or security interests. During the Vietnam War, for example, Moscow and Beijing quickly rushed to Hanoi’s aid when President Johnson decided to bomb North Vietnam to stop it from invading the South. Even without a big power behind its back, Tehran was big enough to make Washington hesitate to launch an invasion during the hostage crisis.

If the West cannot defeat small or medium-sized revolutionary states like North Vietnam and Iran, this leaves it the only choices of either accommodating or ignoring them. These states are not too big to ignore like Russia or China. Given its ideological enmity with revolutionary states, the West likely prefers ignoring and even



isolating, rather than accommodating, their challengers. The likely outcome is persistent tensions rather than war.

If the first logic is about the power capabilities of revolutionary states, the second concerns their values. For all their professed hatred of “Western” values, revolutionary worldviews in most cases contain elements that can be traced back to the West or that are compatible with Western values.⁴¹ This is obviously true for communist revolutions. Communism is a thoroughly Western product even though anti-Western communists did not want to acknowledge this fact. Underlying communism is an emphasis on materialism and on the technologically driven development of human society, among other values. Communist revolutionaries like those in Vietnam sought not to return to the pre-Western society of their ancestors but to achieve the industrial society of the West. Western technology and material culture had much to attract them and provided some basis for accommodation.⁴² The logic applies less to Islamist movement since Islam did not originate in the West.⁴³ Still, it applies to the Iranian revolutionaries who have enthusiastically embraced material development. On assuming power, the clerics retained in the new government nearly all the economic technocrats employed by the Shah—many of whom had been trained in the West. With their help, Khomeini’s Iran continued the five-year plans with ambitious projects.⁴⁴

It is true that radicals may desire Western technology simply for its utility. They also need modern weapons to successfully resist Western domination. Leaders of all poor countries want to obtain modern industry and technology for the same reasons. Practical interests do play an important role in inducing revolutionary states to moderate their policies. However, there is more than just pragmatism. Revolutionaries may rebel against Western domination out of their experience growing up and living under that domination, but most are not anti-modern. Modern technology and material culture are undeniably part of the vision of most, if not all, revolutionaries. Yet modern technology and material culture are also undeniably Western products. The dilemma for revolutionaries is how to separate or distinguish between what is modern, which they desire, and what is “Western,” which they are against. The tendency toward pragmatism may simply mask the attraction from Western material culture that revolutionaries cannot escape but loath to acknowledge.

And the West gives the rest more than just material things. Key Western/modern concepts, such as nation, sovereign state, republic, popular sovereignty, rule of law,

⁴¹ In studying radical religious movements such as Al-Qaeda and Hizbut Tarir that challenge the Westphalian world order, Barack Mendelsohn argues that “couriers of a challenge to a global political order are not completely detached from the order they seek to overthrow; they are in fact constituted, at least partially, by this order.” Barack Mendelsohn, “God vs. Westphalia: Radical Islamist Movements and the Battle for Organizing the World,” *Review of International Studies* 38 (2012), 599.

⁴² There exist communists who are not strongly attracted to material culture such as Cambodia’s Khmer Rouge, but these are a small minority.

⁴³ However, the Islamic philosophical tradition which deeply influenced Khomeini actually originated from Greek thoughts which held that a community with shared purposes was essential for the development of human beings. See Vanessa Martin, *Creating an Islamic State: Khomeini and the Making of a New Iran* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2000), 34.

⁴⁴ Ervand Abrahamian, *A History of Modern Iran* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 169.



constitution, and even freedom and democracy, are in fact incorporated into, and deeply inform, many strands of non-Western radical thought. These concepts themselves were radical when they first emerged, championed by great revolutionaries or revolutionary thinkers in France, England, and the USA. Revolutionaries in the “Third World” might challenge the reigning world order dominated by those Western countries, but most of them in fact shared the broad outlook of their forebears in the West that contains a deep belief in linear progress and in the ability of individuals to change the world, a fervent disdain for traditional monarchy, a great passion for national sovereignty and for a powerful centralized state that guarantees social welfare, and other values. The shared respect revolutionaries have for certain Western concepts and institutions can help revolutionaries gain legitimacy in the West. To the extent that revolutionary states can implement those concepts and institutions more effectively than can the West, those states can stand on the moral high ground to criticize the West for its hypocrisy and compel Western states to make concessions.

For example, one of the key goals of both Vietnamese and Iranian revolutions was to achieve a sovereign state free from foreign rule or intervention. Both revolutions did not reject democracy; they rejected only Western democracy. The North Vietnamese government was a totalitarian dictatorship, but during wartime, its claims of socialist democracy attracted the admiration of many American luminaries from Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. to Professor Noam Chomsky. Iran is a theocratic state centered on Islam, yet Western political concepts have not a modest place in its institutions. The Constitution, for example, allows free elections of the president and the Majlis, a kind of parliament. Although these institutions are subject to higher (religious) authorities that are the Supreme Leader and the Guardian Council, they are not without power.⁴⁵ Iran certainly is not a democracy in the Western sense and Iran’s presidential elections may have involved frauds, but elections as a means to express popular will are clearly not insignificant. However, as an Islamic state, Teheran’s version of “democracy” did not attract admiration from Western intellectuals as Hanoi’s did.

The cases of Dr. King and Professor Chomsky suggest that the so-called West is not monolithic in terms of values. Within each Western society ample sympathy exists for revolutions in the developing world, thanks to the West’s own past revolutions and current liberal politics. Not just leftist intellectuals and young students, but many prominent politicians in the West were enthusiastic allies of Third World causes. In the 1960s and 1970s, antiwar protesters on American university campuses profoundly frustrated the attempt by their government to defeat communism in Southeast Asia. The internal division of Western societies makes it possible for them to accommodate, if not fully accept, revolutions.

The logic of shared values suggests that the more a revolutionary state shares with the West its respect for key political concepts, the more likely accommodation is, other things being equal. The force of accommodation works both ways. If revolutionaries embrace material development, accommodation with the West promises

⁴⁵ Abrahamian, *A History of Modern Iran*, 165–167.



material benefits that are ideologically justifiable. Western governments are led to accommodation with revolutionary states not by such promises but out of their own values and pressures from within their societies.

Yet power capabilities and value compatibility are not sufficient in assessing the evolution of revolutionary states in a hostile Western-dominated world. The third logic has to do with certain *attitudes* that all revolutionaries share and that create the self-destructive tendencies found in revolutionary states.⁴⁶ Revolutions have often devoured their own children, to borrow the French journalist Jacques Mallet du Pan's famous adage. Political purges by Stalin, Mao, Ho Chi Minh, Pol Pot, and Khomeini may have strengthened radical factions in the revolution, but they have also dissipated revolutionary energies, depleted the talent pool, generated cynicism and bitterness if not revolt, and made it harder for revolutionary states to focus on realizing the promises of revolution. As historian David Chandler describes the disastrous result of Pol Pot's purges,

When the Vietnamese launched their invasion [of Cambodia] in December 1979, the [Communist Party of Kampuchea]'s Central Committee had been decimated. Except for Ta Mok, all the original zone secretaries and most of their replacements had been purged, as had the administrators of nearly all the nation's factories and hospitals and hundreds of military cadres. By the end of 1978, there were not enough experienced people to run the country or enough military leaders to organize a coherent defense.⁴⁷

In other words, the Khmer Rouge was apparently destroyed less by their Vietnamese enemy than by themselves. While Cambodia is an extreme case, under most revolutionary governments domestic policies aimed at radical changes of the *status quo* often fuel resistance among the population: for communist states, it was farmers who resisted collectivization and workers who protested against the unreliable supply and poor quality of food. The more revolutionary leaders are impatient for radical changes and willing to employ violence to implement those changes, the more intense popular resistance is to be expected. Popular resistance may not be sufficient to overthrow revolutionary rule, but it can frustrate the efforts of state building and economic development by revolutionary governments, forcing them to sue for peace abroad or be weakened to the point that their external enemies can easily defeat them.

Revolutionary states' propensity to engage in conflict *with each other* is just as self-destructive as their desire for radical changes and their proclivity for violence. A main cause for this conflict between revolutionary brothers is the ambition to lead world revolution. Many if not most revolutionary leaders, from Mao to Castro and

⁴⁶ Note that this third logic is about attitudes, which are different from the beliefs of revolutionaries (the second logic), even though the two may be related at some levels. For example, one may believe in radical changes but are prudent enough to implement them gradually with less violence to reduce potential resistance.

⁴⁷ David Chandler, *Voices from S-21: Terror and History in Pol Pot's Secret Prison* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999), 76.



from Khomeini to Pol Pot, harbor this ambition. This ambition was a main cause of the Sino-Soviet conflict, the Third Indochinese War involving China, Vietnam, and Cambodia, and, to be discussed further below, the conflict between Al-Qaeda and ISIS.

Underlying the various self-destructive tendencies are thus three main attitudes, including impatience for radical changes, penchant for violence, and ambition to lead world revolution. All revolutionaries seem to share these attitudes albeit at different levels. We argue that the more impatient, violent, and ambitious revolutionaries are, the more likely it is that they will destroy themselves sooner or later, other things being equal.

The three logics of power capabilities, shared values, and self-destruction suggest why and how revolutions may be accommodated, tolerated, ignored, or simply destroyed by their own fanaticism. Table 1 below shows how the three logics may be combined in real cases to suggest likely outcomes for the evolving relationship a revolutionary state has with the global order. The cases in the table are for illustrative purpose only. Many examples concerning Vietnam and Iran have been cited above, and the next section will be devoted to an analysis of the Islamic State. Our conceptual framework explains why ISIS was not accommodated and would be destroyed by its own fanaticism.

The case of the Islamic State (ISIS)

The Islamic State began in the early 2000s in northern Iraq as a small group of armed men led by Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, a Jordanian.⁴⁸ This group, whose members came from many countries, had earlier fought against Soviet forces with the Mujahidin in Afghanistan. On the eve of the USA-led Allies' invasion of this country in late 2001, these men were part of the Al-Qaeda organization under Osama bin Laden's leadership. As Al-Qaeda fled Afghanistan, al-Zarqawi led his men to Iraq from where they rapidly expanded following the toppling of Saddam Hussein by Allies' forces in 2003.

While nominally pledging loyalty to Al-Qaeda, the group, now calling itself Al Qaeda in Iraq (AQI), began to develop its distinct identity under al-Zarqawi's leadership by adopting a policy of extreme violence against a much broadened spectrum of enemies. Not just non-believers but even fellow Muslims viewed as "deviants" from the faith, including the Shia in Iraq, were now targeted. Al-Zarqawi's sectarian war with Iraqi Shia was publicly criticized by Al-Qaeda's leadership, but he did not yield. To demonstrate its revolutionary commitments and to recruit followers, the group also launched a new tactic of broadcasting its acts of gruesome violence

⁴⁸ This history of ISIS is based on Fawaz A. Gerges, *ISIS: A History* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2016), ch. 2. For recent reviews of important works on ISIS, see Daniel Byman, "Understanding the Islamic State," *International Security* 40: 4 (2016), 127–165; and *idem.*, "Explaining Al-Qaeda's Decline," *Journal of Politics* 79: 3 (2017), 1106–1117.



Table 1 Three logics for transcendence and likely evolutionary paths of revolutionary states

| | Vietnam | Iran | ISIS |
|---|--|--|--|
| Logic of power capabilities | Medium size; backed by a big power till 1991 | Medium size; not backed by any big power | Small; not backed by any big power |
| Logic of shared values | Many shared values | Some shared values | No shared values |
| Logic of self-destruction | Somewhat strong | Strong | Very strong |
| Likely evolution of the revolutionary state | Most likely to be accommodated | Likely to be accommodated but tensions may persist | Unlikely to be accommodated; likely to self-destruct |



(such as a video clip showing al-Zarqawi beheading an American, Nicholas Berg, in 2004).

Al-Zarqawi was killed in 2006, but his successors, Abu Hamza Muhajjer and Abu Omar al-Baghdadi, continued his extremist policy. The establishment of the Islamic State of Iraq (ISI) was declared in 2006 following al-Zarqawi's death. However, the sectarian war eventually turned Sunni tribes in Iraq against ISI. The organization suffered another heavy blow with the death of Muhajjer and al-Baghdadi in 2010. Nevertheless, under a new leader, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, ISI was able to recover. Bin Laden's death in 2011 further emboldened al-Baghdadi, who openly challenged Al-Qaeda now under the leadership of al-Zawahiri. ISI subsequently scored many victories thanks to a combination of factors, including the USA withdrawal from Iraq, the sectarian policy of the Maliki government in Iraq that alienated Sunni Iraqis, the incorporation into ISIS of many former commanders of Saddam Hussein's army and Baathist party, and the new civil war in Syria. The capture of Mosul, Iraq's second largest city by ISIS forces, in 2014 marked a new height for the group, giving Al-Baghdadi the confidence to proclaim the founding of ISIS with himself as the new caliph with the mission of leading all Muslims worldwide against non-believers and deviants.

Ideologically, the Islamic State is an "extension of the global Salafi-jihadi movement" as it shares a number of core beliefs with Al-Qaeda and other Salafi-Jihadist groups.⁴⁹ The core beliefs divide the world into starkly opposing camps. For Salafists-Jihadists, there is only one correct path: only by returning to an unadulterated, pure form of Islam "as expressed in the Qur'an, Sunna, and *ijma* (consensus) of the Prophet's companions can the Muslim community find the straight path of Islam."⁵⁰ Sayyid Qutb, a "seminal thinker of the modern Salafi jihadist movement," viewed the "West's artificial separation of religion and the state" as being a "hideous schizophrenia that Muslims must not allow to infect the Islamic world."⁵¹ Another leading ideologue of the movement, Yusuf al-Ayirir, claimed, "one of the worst products of secularism is democracy, which abolishes the authority of the Sharia over society and opposes it in form and content...the command is for none but Allah."⁵² Anything not sanctioned by what the Salafists consider original sources, they consider an innovation, and "the most evil matter is novelty, and every novelty is an innovation, every innovation is an error, and every error leads to hellfire."⁵³ This extreme interpretation, according to Wiktorowicz, "leads to extreme boundary activation that divides the world into two camps in Manichean style: the true

⁴⁹ Gerges, *ISIS*, 23.

⁵⁰ Quintan Wiktorowicz, *Radical Islam Rising: Muslim Extremism in the West* (Lanham, Md: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2005), 184.

⁵¹ Mark E. Stout, Jessica M. Huckabey, and John R. Schindler, *The Terrorist Perspectives Project: Strategic and Operational Views of Al Qaeda and Associated Movements*, ed. Jim Lacey (Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 2008), 9, 11.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 11.

⁵³ Morten Storm, Paul Cruickshank, and Tim Lister, *Agent Storm: My Life Inside Al Qaeda and the CIA*, Hardcover edition (New York, NY: Atlantic Monthly Press, 2014), n.p.



believers and everyone else.”⁵⁴ In addition, the core beliefs demand the universal application of its value system. Salafi-Jihadists groups not only espouse hostility toward Western secular societies but also at in-group members not considered “true believers.”⁵⁵

This view extends to international law as well. Salafi Jihadists find the United Nations an “idolatrous organization.” The fundamental problem with the United Nations and various international agreements, according to Bin Laden as expressed in his writings to Mullah Omar in April 2001, is that they are incompatible with ‘Islamic belief.’⁵⁶ ISIS leaders did not recognize the border between Iraq and Syria; the Islamic caliphate would not abide by the colonial boarder drawn by unbelievers.⁵⁷

The logic of power capabilities

At its peak in 2015, ISIS occupied a territory nearly as large as Great Britain. However, much of the territory was made up of deserts, and the size of the population was therefore small. ISIS has not had the backing of a great power. It has affiliates in Libya, Somalia, Nigeria, Afghanistan, and elsewhere, but these are not under its direct control.⁵⁸ ISIS’ power capabilities lie mainly with its control over population and oil resources in parts of Iraq and Syria, and its ability to mobilize foreign fighters from all over the world.

The logic of power capabilities suggests that the West would not accommodate ISIS and would seek its destruction if threatened. This was in fact what happened after ISIS’s victory in Mosul in 2014. Factors that delayed the destruction of ISIS included the USA reluctance to send its troops into Iraq again for fear of a high level of casualties and regional rivalries, specifically the Sunni-Shia split combined with the civil war in Syria.⁵⁹ For all the talk of a broad anti-ISIS coalition, the USA-led alliance was slow to come up with an effective plan to defeat ISIS.⁶⁰ Twenty-one states pledged air and military support, but only thirteen launched airstrikes; the USA has carried out the vast majority—four out of five—of airstrikes against ISIS. This was mainly because the Sunni bloc prioritized fighting Assad over ISIS.

Turkey has faced just such competing objectives. Erdogan, the Turkish President, long resisted calls from the USA to join the anti-ISIS coalition, claiming that the fight against Assad must take priority. This is all the more important because of Turkey’s proximity to the Islamic State; ISIS recruited out of and used Turkish territory for logistics and resupply. In a secret deal, Erdogan directly negotiated with ISIS to

⁵⁴ Wiktorowicz, *Radical Islam Rising*, 185.

⁵⁵ Gerges, *ISIS*, 25.

⁵⁶ Stout, Huckabey, and Schindler, *The Terrorist Perspectives Project*.

⁵⁷ Gerges, *ISIS*.

⁵⁸ For an insightful analysis of ISIS’ relationship with these affiliates, see Barack Mendelsohn, *The al-Qaeda Franchise: The Expansion of al-Qaeda and Its Consequences* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016), esp. chs. 7 and 8.

⁵⁹ Gerges, *ISIS*.

⁶⁰ *Ibid*, 49.



obtain the release of forty-six Turkish citizens captured when ISIS seized the Turkish consulate in Mosul. Erdogan only turned on ISIS after the group attacked Kurdish Turks inside Turkish territory, violating Turkey's sovereignty and embarrassing Erdogan. Tellingly, al-Baghdadi had the opportunity to work with the Turks, cultivating a neutral power on its border. However, al-Baghdadi pushed Erdogan into the anti-ISIS coalition with his attacks in Turkish territory and subsequent attacks on Erdogan personally. ISIS produced a propaganda video referring to Erdogan as 'Satan,' and calling on Turks to overthrow him. Nonetheless, Erdogan's actions before relations turned sour, suggested that ISIS and Turkey shared some of the same strategic objectives.

Despite cracks within the West and its allies and the American hesitation to put boots on the ground, ISIS has now lost all its territories. Under relentless American bombing and attacks by Kurdish and Syrian forces backed by Iran, Russia, Turkey, and the USA, the last stronghold of ISIS in Baghuz, Syria gave way in March 2019.

The logic of shared values

Unlike communist states and even Iran's Islamic Republic, ISIS shares no values with Western societies despite its heavy reliance on modern technologies.⁶¹ It is paradoxical that a group with the professed aim of taking the world back to the days of the righteous caliphs would be so reliant on modern technology; most members of ISIS have never lived in an era without modern communication technology.⁶² ISIS recruits members with IT and online marketing experience; it employs professional journalists, filmmakers, photographers, and editors; ISIS is reliant on 'bitcoin' and other technologies to move money.⁶³ It engages in 'cyber jihad,' employing fake anti-ISIS websites to locate enemies⁶⁴ and offers large salaries to engineers.⁶⁵ The recent infusion of ex-Baath party members gives the group technical skills as well, as the former Baath Party members of ISIS have experience in the Iraqi Army, the petroleum industry, and administrative experience running a large state.⁶⁶

While there is little doubt ISIS is reliant on modern technologies, the question remains as to whether the group is attracted to Western material culture. Leaders of Al-Qaeda and ISIS declare hostility to 'Western images' or forms of Western entertainment. ISIS forbids dancing and music because, according to al-Zarqawi, they "turn religion into a festival of singing and dancing" and act as an opiate or sedative pulling members away from 'Jihad culture.'⁶⁷ Other Salafi-Jihadist groups advocate

⁶¹ In contrast, radical Islamist thinkers like Mawdudi and Qutb who have inspired ISIS fighters did owe an intellectual debt to the communist doctrine. David Cook, *Understanding Jihad*, 2nd edition (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2015), 100.

⁶² Abdel Bari Atwan, *Islamic State: The Digital Caliphate*, 1st edition (University of California Press, 2015), 12.

⁶³ See Atwan, *Islamic State*, 18–25.

⁶⁴ *Ibid*, 27.

⁶⁵ Jessica Stern and J. M. Berger, *ISIS: The State of Terror*, Reprint edition (New York: Ecco, 2016), 88.

⁶⁶ Gerges, *ISIS*.

⁶⁷ Stout, Huckabey, and Schindler, *The Terrorist Perspectives Project*, 176–77.



pushing Western media out of the Muslim world. The banishment of Western media is necessary because, according to Salafi-Jihadists thinkers, Western cultural norms work their way into the consciences of the Muslim world, as popular programs, programs similar to *American Idol*, have the ability to “transform Muslim minds.”⁶⁸ Of particular concern is the ability of Western images to pull members away from a life of Jihad and sacrifice toward a life of pleasure and comfort. This concern dates back to Muhammad who highlights the problem of *wahn*: “a term commonly translated as ‘weakness,’ but which Muhammad defined as ‘a love of the world and hatred (or dislike) of death.’”⁶⁹ If members are more attached to the pleasures of this world, they may be less likely to desire martyrdom. Salafi-Jihadist groups favor the banishment of Western images for another but closely related reason: the images encourage the idea “that peaceful coexistence is possible, thereby denying the need for Jihad.”⁷⁰ Both points share a common theme: Western media culture acts as an opiate or anesthetic and pushes Muslims away from the life of sacrifice and Jihad.

Because ISIS shares no values with the West, it has received little support in Western societies except a small number of followers who have carried out terrorist activities in France, Belgium, the United Kingdom, and the USA. This does not mean that Westerners have united against ISIS. Despite recent savage attacks on Western targets, David Cook laments, “[t]he number of apologists [in the West] who claim that jihad and terrorist activities carried out by radical Muslims have nothing to do with Islam or are solely the result of poverty or colonialism or other Western evils is still depressingly high.”⁷¹ Leftist intellectuals in the West have not rallied to support ISIS, as many once did for Vietnamese or Cambodian communists. Yet they have generally refrained from criticizing Islamism for fear of being called “Islamophobic,” which they view as politically incorrect. Many believe that the root cause of religious zealotry is not religion but the USA or American imperialism, and they focus their criticisms on US foreign policy rather than radical Islam.⁷² Although these leftists do not support ISIS, their condemnation of American imperialism can hinder the US campaign against ISIS. However, at most the critics could do is to prevent an American military intervention; their criticisms have failed to be translated into pressure for American or other Western governments to accommodate ISIS. The logic of shared values suggests that Western states would not tolerate ISIS when it began to pose a significant threat to them.

⁶⁸ Ibid., 179.

⁶⁹ Ibid.

⁷⁰ Ibid., 177.

⁷¹ Cook, *Understanding Jihad*, x. Cook also writes that “[u]nwilliness to take Muslim radicals at their word when they clearly state that they are defending Islam, are carrying out jihad, or view the non-Muslim world as a potential target is still widespread throughout the media and policy worlds.” Ibid., x–xi.

⁷² Michael Walzer, “Islamism and the Left,” *Dissent* 62: 1 (January 2015), 107–117.



The logic of self-destruction

ISIS stands out among all radical Islamist groups for its brand of fanaticism that is perhaps unmatched by any revolutionary state in modern history except the Khmer Rouge. ISIS leaders from al-Zarqawi to the current al-Baghdadi have repeatedly displayed their ambition to lead the global jihad. They first ignored and then publicly broke with Al-Qaeda Central (AQC) over their policy of declaring war against Shia Muslims. When al-Zawahiri, bin Laden's successor and current leader of AQC, demanded that ISIS remove itself from Syria, Adnani, a spokesperson for al-Baghdadi and ISIS, dismissed this request and directly challenged al-Zawahiri's religious authority, claiming that ISIS leaving Syria may please AQC but not God. Adnani went further, questioning al-Zawahiri's leadership of the movement, citing reports that he is 'senile,' and accusing al-Zawahiri of turning AQC into a "quietist political group."⁷³

ISIS' effort to control its affiliate, Al-Nusra, which is a major Islamist group fighting against Assad in Syria, led to a fraternal war between the two groups. Although Al-Nusra was initially set up by ISIS, it later sought to pose as a locally based organization rather than as a transnational jihadist movement that was part of ISIS.⁷⁴ In response to pressure from ISIS, al-Nusra leader al-Jawlani switched the group's loyalty to AQC. This led to bloody attacks of ISIS against al-Nusra forces in Syria, killing thousands of the latter's fighters.⁷⁵

While ambitious to lead the global jihad against the West and their Middle Eastern allies, ISIS's establishment of the Caliphate and zealous application of Islamic law in territories under its control indicates its impatience for radical changes and its great penchant for violence. As al-Baghdadi explained to his followers when he declared the formation of ISIS in 2014, "We spilled rivers of our blood to water the seeds of the *khilafah*, laid its foundation with our skulls, and built its tower over our corpses. We were patient for years in the face of being killed, imprisoned, having our bones broken and our limbs severed. We drank all sort of bitterness, dreaming of this day. Would we delay it for even a moment after having reached it?"⁷⁶

The founding of the Caliphate and implementation of Sharia law allowed AQI and ISIS leaders to brandish their revolutionary credentials just like land reform and collectivized farming for communists.⁷⁷ Under their rule, Sunni Muslims reported floggings, crucifixion, stoning, and cutting off of hands and feet for various infractions. A Sunni Muslim reported the beheading of an 8-year-old girl at the hands of an AQI member. In addition to the implementation of strict Islamic law, AQI and then ISIS "horned in on their (the Sunni tribes) illicit smuggling activities."⁷⁸ The

⁷³ Ibid., 248.

⁷⁴ Ibid., 182.

⁷⁵ Gerges, *ISIS*, 191.

⁷⁶ Abu Bakr Al-Baghdadi, "Proclamation of the Caliphate," June 29, 2014. In Cook, *Understanding Jihad*, 236.

⁷⁷ McCants, *The ISIS Apocalypse*, 38.

⁷⁸ Ibid., 39.



combination of the strict implementation of Islamic law and its interference with the Sunni tribes' previous economic activities was a large part of the awakening councils in Iraq in 2007. They 'awoke' to the threat of the Islamic State and worked with the USA to push the extremists out of Iraq. This put the revolutionary state in a difficult position: It was in a war against all, with both the Maliki government and the Sunni tribes, now working with the USA against it.

Despite such setbacks, ISIS leaders did not relent. In June 2014, ISIS seized Mosul and implemented its own version of Islamic law there. ISIS banned smoking and forced residents to abide by a strict dress code and close shops during prayer times. Al-Baghdadi employed a form of religious police that roam areas, enforcing obedience; the religious police ensured that women were dressed properly and accompanied when out of the home. The smoking ban is telling. As McCants notes, smoking is very popular in the Middle East and, even in the strict Wahhabi, Saudi Arabia is not banned. The Islamic State punished some smokers with fines and others received 40 lashes with a whip. "Repeat offenders faced jail time, severed fingers, and even death," writes McCants. "The severed head of a state commander in Syria was found with a cigarette dangling from his mouth and a sign that read: 'this is not permissible shiek.'"⁷⁹ In territories in Syria under ISIS control, specifically Aleppo and Raqqah, Amnesty International reports indiscriminate killings by ISIS. "Aleppo recounts horror stories of summary executions and torture by a security clique without regard to any religious legal or moral code," writes Gerges.⁸⁰

ISIS leaders view violence as necessary for the establishment of the Islamic State. Qutb and other Salafi-Jihadists argue that the 'sword and the word will complement one another.'⁸¹ The need for violence is justified because, according to this view, "Islamic governments have never and will never be established through peaceful solutions... they are established as they as they always have been: by pen and gun; by word and bullet; and by tongue and teeth."⁸²

The ideology does not merely condone violence; it offers its adherents a powerful motivation to join its cause. As Wiktorowicz argues in his analysis of the individual radicalization process, the ideology frames the need to pursue Jihad as an obligation to individual Muslims that offers unimaginable rewards. Much of the social movement literature, from a rational choice perspective, argues that individuals gauge the prospects of success when deciding to take part in a social movement. Wiktorowicz argues that for radical Islamists this is less of an issue. Whether or not an Islamic State is established, the pursuit of the Islamic state is a way of fulfilling one's obligations to God, which is how salvation is achieved, producing a tremendous payoff in the afterlife.⁸³ In addition, adherents interpret suffering as "a sign that they are pursuing a straight path and thus saving their souls."⁸⁴ Gerges finds that the messianic

⁷⁹ McCants, *The ISIS Apocalypse*, 139.

⁸⁰ Gerges, *ISIS*, 243.

⁸¹ Stout, Huckabey, and Schindler, *The Terrorist Perspectives Project*, 13.

⁸² *Ibid.*

⁸³ See Wiktorowicz, *Radical Islam Rising*, 181.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, 181.



ideology helps bolster the Islamic State's fierce determination, explaining why the group has no shortage of volunteers for martyrdom operations and why it remains resilient and durable in the face of sustained bombing campaigns.⁸⁵ Thus, the ideology not only solves the collective action problem in various social movements, but also produces a "steady sense of purpose and certitude" for a "spiritual payoff."⁸⁶ As Stern and Berger⁸⁷ note, the use of extreme violence not only helps to draw attention to the group and facilitate recruitment but also signals to rival groups—such as the Iraqi Army—its level of dedication.

Despite the benefits, the use of extreme violence has some important drawbacks, such as pushing away moderate groups, specifically other Sunni or Shia Muslims who may sympathize with the Islamic State's cause, but recoil from its harsh methods. Both bin Laden and al-Zawahiri warned leaders of ISIS that extreme violence would fracture the Muslim community.⁸⁸ The Sunni revolt against AQI and the Islamic State was largely a result of al-Zarqawi's "brutal tactics and terrorism" that bled the community.⁸⁹ The strategy proved faulty as al-Zarqawi alienated popular support, which is essential for a successful insurgency. The logic of self-destruction suggests that ISIS would destroy itself as the Khmer Rouge before it, because its fanaticism created numerous enemies, alienated people, and incited fraternal warfare.

In conclusion, the logics we proposed predict a bleak future for ISIS. The revolutionary state emerged in an area not abundant in population and resources. It also lacks a great power patron. The ideology ISIS shares with other Salafi-Jihadist groups has little in common with the West in terms of fundamental values. The group also displayed strong self-destructive tendencies as evidenced in its great ambition to lead the global jihad, its impatience for radical changes, and its resort to extreme violence to carry out its mission. The combination of the three logics explains why it was to die sooner or later, both out of implosion from within and attacks from without.⁹⁰ As the last stronghold held by ISIS in Baghuz, Syria has now fallen, its reemergence is doubtful.⁹¹

⁸⁵ Gerges, *ISIS*, 273–78.

⁸⁶ Wiktorowicz, *Radical Islam Rising*, 183.

⁸⁷ Stern and Berger, *ISIS*.

⁸⁸ Gerges, *ISIS*.

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, 86.

⁹⁰ Comparing Calvinism and jihadism, Andrew Phillips proposes a different assessment of jihadism from our argument here. In particular, he argues that "jihadism' narrow ideological appeal, together with jihadists' inability to exploit the mobilizational capacity of existing transnational religious networks, fatally constrains their potential to exploit existing vulnerabilities within the global state system." Andrew Phillips, "The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Jihadism—Transnational Religious Insurgencies and the Transformation of International Orders," *Review of International Studies* 36 (2010), 276.

⁹¹ Rukmini Callimachi, "Last ISIS Village Falls, and a Caliphate Is Erased," *The New York Times*, March 23, 2019.



Conclusion

In this paper, we have proposed a simple set of logics to assess the likely evolution of a revolutionary state that challenges the Western-dominated global order. The three logics are the logics of power capabilities, shared values, and self-destruction. While the first logic borrows the insight from realist IR, the second takes ideologies seriously in the tradition of constructivism. The third logic grows out of our comparative study of revolutions as domestic events. We hoped to have demonstrated that the three logics were useful in explaining the ongoing evolution of ISIS' relationship with the existing world order that it set out the overturn.

As a young revolutionary state, ISIS has caused tremendous suffering in the Middle East for Muslims and non-Muslims alike. It drew the USA back to the Middle East (with some reluctance) despite President Obama's wish to extricate the USA from there. It brought Russia into a potential confrontation with the USA. It complicated the civil war in Syria, helped destabilize Turkey, and strengthened the influence of Iran in the region. ISIS has clearly shaken up the regional order even though it is still too early to see all the impacts.

Ironically, ISIS may have strengthened the Westphalian world order instead of transforming it. As Western states mobilized to contain ISIS and coped with the threat from terrorist attacks inside their borders from ISIS supporters, they have improved their surveillance and border control capacity. ISIS' brutal attacks on the cultural institutions of Western societies (such as the assassinations of *Charlie Hebdo's* editorial staff) galvanized social support for Western governments. While ISIS has offered another crucial test for the global order, our reasoning explains why the threat it posed was to be transcended.

Compliance with ethical standards

Conflict of interest On behalf of all authors, the corresponding author states that there is no conflict of interest

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