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The ISIS Bandwagon: Under What Conditions Do Groups Pledge Support?

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Introduction

While the Islamic State in Syria and the Levant (ISIS/ISIL) is intent on establishing a geographically-centered caliphate in the heart of the Middle East, there are over 50 organizations around the world that have pledged allegiance, support, or "bay'at" to ISIS, becoming affiliates or "wiliats." This pledge of allegiance transforms formerly domestic terror organizations with limited aims into global actors, seeking to expand the footprint of ISIS far beyond current borders. In the last year, ISIS affiliates in Egypt, Libya, Tunisia, Chechnya, Uzbekistan, and Tajikistan, for instance, have grown exponentially as their message transitioned from domestic regime change to international aims (Mehl 2015). According to Secretary General Ban Ki Moon, "the recent expansion of the ISIL sphere of influence across west and north Africa, the Middle East and south and southeast Asia demonstrates the speed and scale at which the gravity of the threat has evolved in just 18 months," (Lederer 2016). This phenomenon is especially dangerous considering the recent findings that as pressure mounts on the central node in a terror network, the periphery is likely to experience more lethal and frequent attacks (Horowitz and Potter 2014). As Iraqi and coalition forces militarily pressure ISIS, the next generation of terror waits in the wings.

Just as the rise of ISIS took academia and policy-makers by

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surprise, there is concern that ISIS wiliats around the world will produce the next serious wave of global terrorism. That many wiliats send fighters to ISIS to gain experience and training to bring back home remains one of the most pressing security concerns for dozens of US allies. However, very little is currently known about these groups' hierarchical structures, tactical and target preferences, material resources, training and intelligence sharing, their merging and splitting tendencies, or their material connections with ISIS-central and other locally-based affiliates. Even the most advanced studies on terror networks (Asal and Rethemeyer 2008; Asal et al. 2016; Horowitz and Potter 2014) have stopped short of analyzing the complexity of this new phenomenon.

This paper investigates the conditions under which domestic terror groups pledge allegiance to ISIS. I build an argument largely derived from the "cultural turn" in terrorism studies (Hegghammer 2016; Day 2015b) maintaining that groups endorse ISIS as an act of imaginative social outbidding and legitimacy seeking. The argument proceeds in four sections. First, I discuss existing theories about terror group alliances. Second, I outline a new theoretical approach. This section maintains that imaginative boundary making within groups, which did not previously exist, is uniquely enable through the rise of ISIS and their Takfiri brand of Islam.[1] Third, I introduce the *ISISBandwagon Dataset* and the quantitative research design of the project. I then present findings, followed by a discussion of empirical results. The paper concludes with a summary, discussion of future research avenues, and several policy implications of the project.

Why Do Groups Ally?

The first, widely held, explanation of group alliances maintains that groups ally to ensure survival. The most relevant research is in the field of Military alliances. Military Alliances allow for smaller states to bandwagon with a larger state in order to increase their chances of survivability (Walt 1993). Alliances provide a joint order of battle, coordination of attack, and diffusion of new technologies and weapons (Keohane 197l; Horowitz Potter 2012, 202). In this manner, alliances are key force multipliers that increase the survivability of each individual state in the arrangement. Similar research in business collaboration shows that companies merge and coordinate when attempting to access new markets or build products with better economy of scale (Brooks 2005; Skjoett-Larsen et al 2003). Such collaborations are entirely necessary for group survival in a competitive and globalized world. Even terror groups and criminal gangs join together (Idler and Forest 2015). Asal and Rethemeyer (2008) argue that violent nonstate actors join in order to spread the larger risk burden among groups. This is intuitive, since cost benefit analysis encourages spreading risk while (ideally) reaping the same level benefit for all groups, such as regime change or pressure on a common enemy.

The ultimate observable implication of this approach is that groups will ally when survival depends on material connections to other groups. But there are some troubling

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[1] A **takfiri** (Arabic: تكفيري takfīrī) is a (usually) Sunni Muslim who verbally accuses another Muslim of apostasy. Derived from the word kafir (unbeliever), takfir is the act of accusing others of being impure.

puzzles, specific to ISIS pledges, that this approach can't exactly solve. First, pledges of allegiance to ISIS will invariably draw attention from the global counter terror network. Though these domestic resistance groups operate in secrecy and the shadows, a pledge of alliance draws them out into the sunlight of global anti-terror campaigns. While the US or NATO may care very little strategically about a localized salafi resistance, a transnational ISIS cell will pique interest and mobilize resources. Thus, if survival is the goal, it seems counter-productive to incur increased cost in this manner.

Second, a pledge of allegiance to al-Baghdadi very purposefully severs ties with local constituents in favor of a transnational audience. Since these groups were born out of localized grievances, their principle audience are those who share similar localized grievances. To win the hearts and minds of their neighbors, domestic terror groups must frame their battle around the issues that are relevant for their core constituency in order to replenish fighters and receive material support from the community they are embedded in. A pledge to al-Baghdadi severs that important framing narrative and instead positions the group towards transnational goals, perhaps then risking the perception that the group is taking local resources without bringing results the local population cares about. This alienation is a major risk since it cuts out a crucial resource base, thus decreasing survivability liklihoods.

Finally, it is dubious that any of these pledging groups' survival is truly at risk. Though they may experience strains, affiliates in Sinai, Nigeria, Somalia, and beyond, have not exactly experienced counter-terror campaigns that deplete their resources so badly as to desperately seek out new connections with ISIS.

Another robust explanation maintains that terror groups ally with one another in the search for greater capacity, new capabilities, and access to monetary and human capital. Many studies have argued that alliances are centrally about material consequences for groups – groups reach out to ally with those with substantially higher and desired material capabilities (Horowitz Potter 2012, 200). Small groups ally with larger groups to access new tactics which require skill-building and education, new weapons, and new cadres of recruits that perhaps they would not otherwise have access to. For example, violent nonstate actors, such as cartels, have been shown to work together in order to bolster their capacity. Idler, for instance, shows that violent nonstate actors in Colombia's border regions cooperate in economically motivated "arrangements of convenience" such as fighting together, exchanging tactical expertise, subcontract relationships, supply chain type arrangements, and pacific coexistence (Idler 2012, 68–69)

There are issues applying the capacity argument to ISIS allies. Most significantly, the pledge is a verbal, even imaginary alliance, not a material one. While it may be a strategic move – that "early movers" might reap greater rewards in the future – the endorsement itself is imaginary. Hoping for ISIS to be strong enough in the future to give rewards is quite a different motivational mechanism than specified by scholars like Horowitz and Potter (2014). While these groups may have elongated timeframes (Toft 2006), the move to pledge is nevertheless about an imagined future. Beyond this, the

capacity answer seems empirically reversed in this case. The directionality of foreign fighters leaving local areas and joining ISIS central indicate the alliance drains local capacity, it doesn't bolster local resources.

Furthermore, after the initial pledges of allegiance, many domestic groups actually reduce the complexity of their attacks. Bayet Al Maqudis and many other ISIS fans transitioned from elaborate bombing of military instillations and police to isolated, single case beheadings and crucifying Christians. These attacks are brutal, but not very efficient – symbolic, but not displaying the kind of capacity transfer expected by Horowitz and Potter (2014).

Finally, a pledge of allegiance stands to cut out the non-kafiri base of these organizations, alienating and fractionalizing between moderates and extremist elements. Just as polarization occurs in political contexts, a pledge to ISIS "sectarianizes" the domestic terror group towards a kafiri-centered narrative (Day 2015a). This process puts the organization at odds with constituencies that may be Deobandi, moderate Salafi, Sufi, Shia, and others. A shift to hardline takfir orientation eliminates core nationalist resistance on the local level in favor of global narrative. The claim below is that the takfiri shift not only reduces the explanatory power of the capacity answer, it fundamentally explains the conditions under which groups pledge allegiance to ISIS.

In addition to theoretical inadequacies, current literature is rife with data issues that limit the ability for scholars to answer puzzles about the conditions that push groups to pledge allegiance to ISIS. First, the data does not track mergers, splits, reformations pre/post allegiance. This prevents analysis of organizational coherence effect of alliance and visa versa. Second, the data does not analyze types of violence, targets of violence, or how those outcomes change pre/post alliance. Therefore we know very little about how affiliating with ISIS changes preferences for tactics and targets. Third, the data does not analyze types of resources given/received. Fourth, the data is not longitudinal, meaning we cannot track effect over time. Even the most advanced studies on terror networks (Asal et al. 2015; Pedhazur & Perliger 2006; Asal and Rethmeyer 2008; Horowitz and Potter 2014) have stopped short of analyzing the complexity of this new phenomenon. New data should thus seek to not only provide theoretical explanation for the pledge-puzzle, but also fill the gaps in existing datasets.

A Theory of Takfiri Outbidding

The incentive for endorsing ISIS is less about material gain and instead is something socially imagined. Here I look to Benedict Anderson, who analogously claim that "nations" are "imagined communities" and nationalism "invents nations where they do not exist" (Anderson 2006). Joining the caliphate from afar, likewise, is a fundamentally imaginative act, inventing connections where they previously did not exist. Just as nationalism serves political goals for narrow-cleavages of elites, turning a domestic terrorist organization towards the Caliphate serves the political interests of certain elites within the organization.

The imaginative act is a step of certain elites towards group "brand realignment," rather than producing a new product. This brand helps increase some aspects of a group, making their claims far more visible to those paying attention to trends in jihadi culture, though it may alienate the group's traditional base. Bloom (2007) has argued that suicide attacks are a mechanism that increases the visibility of a group and also allows the group to communicate their level of resolve to their local constituency. In a crowded marketplace, the groups willing to use suicide tactics will decidedly "outbid" those unwilling to use the tactics, and thus will increase their local market share. I argue that the imaginative pledge to ISIS functions in a similar way – the pledge provides a narrow section of elites with a mechanism of outbidding in a crowded marketplace. This functions on both intra and inter group levels. Within the group, we might see that competition for leadership, or disputed hierarchies, produces an incentive for one party to pledge allegiance to ISIS as a mechanisms of outbidding their competitor. This produces the first observable implication:

Hypothesis 1: Intragroup competition for leadership will produce pledges of support to ISIS.

Likewise, between groups, we might see endorsing ISIS come from those groups that have been uncompetitive vis-à-vis another group. Smaller groups, break-away factions, or those who rebrand under a new name will produce pledges, since these groups are trying to assert their identity against status quo terror groups.

Hypothesis 2: Smaller groups will produce pledges of support to ISIS.

Hypothesis 3: Groups which rename themselves will produce pledges of support to ISIS.

Hypothesis 1, 2, and 3 rely on the assumption that groups pledge support as they abandon local framing for political theology framing, an observation well supported in the literature (Henne 2013; Sandal 2012), though not applied to ISIS affiliates. This is done in a way that is intended to reframe the group's mission towards a more legitimate religious identity, outbidding factions that remain nationalist or ecumenical in their identity. In short, the *takfir* orientation of ISIS provides an avenue to rival and outbid others. Framing local grievances in this transnational, takfiri language gives a clearly articulatable public theology, which can demarcate the group from local competitors. Thus, we might say that a pledge of allegiance is a takfiri outbidding process.

Hypothesis 4: Groups who endorse ISIS also will condemn other groups as takfir.

In other words, we should see that groups will endorse ISIS as a function of delegitimizing the authority of others and increasing their own religious credibility.

Finally, we should find that material assistance is not very important in determining which groups endorse ISIS, disconfirming the alternative explanations discussed in the previous section.

Hypothesis 5: Material assistance from the ISIS "Core" to "Periphery" group doesn't increase likelihood of pledges of support to ISIS.

In sum, alliances between terrorist organizations are not simply about material capacity or survival. Nor are alliances simply about endorsing co-religionists, as we might suspect given findings about ideological connections (Asal and Rethemeyer 2008). Rather, domestic terrorist groups endorse ISIS when it serves as an outbidding and rebranding tool. Casting group identity in terms of takfiri political theology allows group elites to create identity boundaries between group members or between groups that did not previously exist.

Data and Method

The ISISBandwagon Data chronicles the organizational life of groups that have pledge allegiance or support for ISIS, both before and after their pledge. The universe of cases includes every group who had endorsed ISIS by December 31, 2015, totaling 41 in at least 16 countries (future iterations of this paper will update this number to the current 52 organizations). The unit of analysis is the group year, since the domestic organization's founding, through their statement of support to ISIS and time thereafter. This totals 217 years of observation.

To gather information about these groups, research assistants utilized LexusNexus to search for 1) a group's name (including variations), 2) the country of the group's operations, and 3) limited the scope of search to one year of the group's existence from founding to the end of 2015. This rendered hundreds, and sometimes thousands or news stories that researchers read and coded for relevant information. Accompanying the coded data are group narratives, complete with a descriptive explanation of the group's trajectory and relationship with ISIS. The sources used for coding each observation are included in narrative sources. These narratives are helpful for scholars interested in replicating the empirical data or better understanding specific group observations. These group narratives can be found in the online appendix, along with data replication files and master codebook.

Three sets of variables are included in the dataset. First, organizational variables include organization age, size, and whether a leader is identifiably in charge of the organization. Also included are instances of whether the organization changes its name, signaling a shift in identity. Since a core part of ISIS' strategy includes activity on social media, this is included, along with whether the group principally targets non-Muslims or attempts to hold territory.

Second, I control for systemic covariates including regime type, with PolityIV data. Logged per capita GDP, from the World Bank, controls for national wealth.

Third, the variable of most interest are the connections between ISIS core and the periphery organizations. These include the explanatory variable of interest, when a group pledges support or doesn't. Also coded dichotomously are material resources that a group gives to ISIS, including money, fighters, training and intelligence. Similarly, we look for evidence, of groups receiving money, fighters, training and intelligence from ISIS. These are also coded dichotomously on the year.

Event-count data can be problematic when there is missing information or if that information is classified by intelligence communities. Further, since each of these organizations operates in the shadow economy, it is extraordinarily difficult to verify with certainty particular events such as foreign fighter numbers, or level of monetary support. To get around these challenges, many other studies proxy for the material support they cannot observe. Horowitz and Potter proxy for material assistance by measuring whether the group displays more sophistication after establishing connections with a more complex core group (2014). However, aggregation at group-year largely avoids complexities of counting specific events of terrorist collusion. Many pieces of evidence surface in a given year that point towards exchange of material assets, and journalists have incentives to report this evidence. Counting material connections as dichotomous over a given year gives a fairly robust and reliable picture of group relationships.

I conduct a linear regression, analyzing the relationship between pledges and other outcomes of interest, attempting to point to the context that best defines the conditions that lead groups to endorse ISIS. As a robustness check, I also conducted logistic regression tests, which displayed concurrent results.

Results

Table 1 presents a series of statistical models that attempt to explain the conditions that give rise to groups pledging allegiance to ISIS. Relying on Achen's (2005) prescription, the models begin simply, excluding control variables, then become more complex to test further hypotheses.

	(1) givepledge	(2) givepledge	(3) givepledge	(4) givepledge	(5) givepledge	(6) givepledge
age	−0.0125** (0.00479)	−0.00310 (0.00470)	−0.00256 (0.00576)	−0.00263 (0.00595)	−0.00259 (0.00577)	−0.00370 (0.00598)
groupsize	−0.0451 (0.0498)	−0.107* (0.0436)	−0.116* (0.0497)	−0.111* (0.0496)	−0.130* (0.0507)	−0.170** (0.0563)
clearheirarchy	−0.269*** (0.0647)	−0.155* (0.0626)	−0.154* (0.0644)	−0.116 (0.0673)	−0.117 (0.0668)	−0.115 (0.0701)
namechange		0.365** (0.115)	0.365** (0.119)	0.396** (0.120)	0.435*** (0.123)	0.465*** (0.111)
activeonsocialmedia		0.523*** (0.0847)	0.512*** (0.0921)	0.499*** (0.0962)	0.417*** (0.103)	0.344** (0.125)
givefighter			0.0562 (0.0720)	0.0375 (0.0821)	0.0449 (0.0858)	0.0457 (0.0886)
givemoney			0.134 (0.118)	0.0779 (0.140)	0.0850 (0.134)	−0.0279 (0.135)
givetrain			−0.0131 (0.0775)	0.0203 (0.101)	0.0253 (0.0990)	0.00738 (0.0937)
recfighter				0.0649 (0.0964)	0.0868 (0.101)	0.0752 (0.100)
recmoney				−0.144 (0.0732)	−0.163* (0.0772)	−0.208* (0.0863)
rectrain				−0.0408 (0.0943)	−0.00696 (0.104)	0.0319 (0.122)
recpledge				0.262 (0.230)	0.225 (0.176)	0.0790 (0.203)
condemn					0.307** (0.112)	0.326* (0.144)
suicide					−0.0700 (0.0647)	−0.0908 (0.0750)
attemptholdterritory					0.0365 (0.106)	−0.0870 (0.0929)
killsnonmuslims					0.0345 (0.0662)	0.0198 (0.0771)
loggdp						0.125* (0.0497)
polityiv						0.00539*** (0.00148)
Constant	0.581*** (0.0709)	0.432*** (0.0716)	0.431*** (0.0761)	0.435*** (0.0771)	0.435*** (0.0736)	−0.613 (0.419)
Observations	207	207	207	207	207	175
R−squared	0.136	0.317	0.321	0.344	0.383	0.407

Standard errors in parentheses
* p<0.05, ** p<0.01, *** p<0.001

Overall, the data point towards organizational features of organizations mattering far more than either structural or material incentives. This seems to support the theory of takfiri outbidding and illustrate the limitations of alternative explanations. We see from Table 1 that smaller groups, active on social media are likely to endorse ISIS. Further, groups endorse ISIS concurrent with name changes and the issuing of condemning fatwas. Interestingly, material connections between ISIS and their affiliates seems to neither precede an endorsement, nor follow on after.

Hypothesis 1, that intragroup competition for leadership will produce pledges of support to ISIS, seems supported in three of the models, as disputed hierarchy positively and significantly correlates with pledges. Additionally, there is a negative and significant relationship between the size of groups and pledges, confirming hypothesis 2. Groups also change their name concurrent with endorsing ISIS, signifying a break with past organizational identity, and supporting hypothesis 3. Models 5 and 6 include the variable for whether the group issue condemning fatwas. In the years that groups endorse ISIS, they indeed issue condemning fawtas – to a statistically significant degree. This adds more credibility to the takfiri outbidding theory and confirms hypothesis 4. Finally, there is hardly any evidence that material assistance from the ISIS core, spreading the the periphery, is a necessary condition for group pledges – groups are probably not incented by the lure of capacity and increased capabilities.

Discussion

Several general points are worth extrapolating from the data, which can both support the theory outlined above and provide avenues for future research. The data indicate that pledges are about organizational weakness, not strength per se. Smaller groups with leadership splits are likely to endorse ISIS, which indicates that the pledge comes from a place of insecurity rather than confidence. Further, the risk of abandoning local constituents means that the groups may be already losing the local fight for supporters.

It is also clear that there is some sort of outbidding process happening between and within groups. The issuing of condemning statements against brothers-in-arms indicates that takfirism, as embodied by ISIS, provides a new avenue for outbidding and legitimacy building. A fruitful avenue for specific case studies should aim to trace this process within a variety of endorsing organizations.

Further, if bandwagoning isn't about survival or capacity-building, then it is fundamentally about imagining one's group operating as ISIS in the local context. Incrasingly, these groups are bringing transnational frames into local fights, with ISIS providing a clear political theology and articulated ideology. This allows for elites to make moves within and between organizations they otherwise could not, under the cover of hardline takfiri rhetoric. Joining the ISIS bandwagon, in sum, doesn't mean that one's organization is materially better off, but it does mean a branding shift towards a different, imagined future.

Most significantly, the ISIS bandwagon provides a new, unique mechanism for dividing up previously ecumenical terrorist groups. The act of pledging bayat places an entirely imagined identity marker within and between groups that did not previously exist. This otherization is uniquely enabled by the rise of ISIS and it is no wonder that small groups and those with blurry hierarchies are more prone to instrumentally play the bayat card.

Finally, these data point in the direction of qualitative investigations of the personality driven organizational fractures within each organization. The quantitative approaches point towards the role of personal ties in the bandwagoning process, usually predicated on severing ties with locally-based groups in favor of larger attention from ISIS central.

Implications

Although it might not be possible to accurately predict the precise time and place of terror attacks, this paper brings us closer to understanding the moments in time that push terror organizations towards ISIS. This is important for better understanding and predicting when these organizations might transition from targeting police and government installations to targeting civilians. From here we may expand to a future hypothesis - that pledging allegiance to ISIS will shift a group's tactics from military style resistance to 'ultraviolence' (i.e. beheadings, crucifixion, with media). Work is presently underway that evaluates how pledging organizations change their tactics and target preferences after hopping on the ISIS bandwagon.

Understanding that groups endorse ISIS at the point they are organizationally weak or in competition provides four important implications for national security policy. First, ISIS lives on as an idea beyond the caliphate, registering as an outbidding mechanism for elites at the local level. In other words, the "ISIS" label now serves as a signifier of legitimacy and credibility, not just a foreign organization in the Levant. We should thus expect that as the ISIS-core is pressured, the ISIS phenomenon will morph and adapt to local theaters, but not die out.

This means, secondly, that the next wave of terror is not going to be regionally contained, but largely will play out on the periphery where small groups are now endorsing ISIS. This presents a serious challenge for preventing foreign fighters looking to hijrah, but face increasingly dangerous hurdles going to the Levant. Going to West Africa or South-East Asia, however, may provide a viable alternative. As ISIS continues to collapse from the inside-out, it is possible that other theaters will prove more conducive to foreign fighter recruitment. The task for combatting violent extremism is thus far broader than current programs would suggest – CVE should take seriously outreach to diaspora communities from every area with active ISIS affiliates. This also indicates that CVE should be about combatting takfirism as a key mechanism of organizational legitimacy, not just about local grievances or broad cultural narratives.

Third, increased avenues of recruitment presents a challenge monitoring returning foreign fighters coming back to Europe and North America. The alliance pledge

fundamentally expands the map of countries of concern from the Levant to dozens of other areas. The department of State, UN, and other organizations should increase monitoring of flows in and out of these areas of concern.

Finally, though not statistically significant at the moment, it remains important to monitor the actual material threat. Especially concerning would be core agents fleeing ISIS for periphery affiliates. These fighters would bring leadership chops, tactical innovations, and ability to train locally. Interestingly, such infusion of leadership might actually challenge local takfiri elites who used ISIS-pledges to outbid others, which could lead to further organizational tensions and even additional splits.

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