Competitive Jihadism: Understanding the Survival Strategies of Jihadist De Facto States

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Abstract

> *The debates dealing with ISIS address the questions of how ISIS is conceptualized, what its aim is, and how it has successfully retained a core sovereignty zone. This study attempts to answer these questions by proposing that ISIS is a de facto state and uses jihadism as a survival strategy. The term 'competitive jihadism' is used to argue that ISIS competes with its metropole states, Syria and Iraq, on the basis of jihadism. This is a deliberate strategy, which aims to attract Muslims inclined to radicalization as well as to recruit foreign fighters by showing the jihadist deficits of the metropole states. As the research shows, ISIS is successful at this game and has become a magnet for foreign fighters. Thus, it is able to increase its military capabilities and continue to survive.*

Keywords: De facto states, competitive jihadism, ISIS, foreign fighters

1. Introduction

The rise of ISIS (Islamic State in Iraq and Syria) has most likely dominated international security agendas since 2014 for two reasons. The first is that ISIS has been able to control territory meant to be under the sovereignty of the Syrian and Iraqi governments. It has expansionist inclinations and the capabilities to realize them. Secondly, ISIS has plotted terrorist attacks on a global scale. Scholars of international relations who aim to define ISIS in order to establish how it can be stopped must examine the following two phenomena.

The first is the *de facto state*, which refers to a political authority functioning within a territory without international legal recognition. A central government might lose its monopoly of violence over a territory, rendering itself unable to prevent an alternative political institution to be established in the territory over which it claims sovereignty. This could reflect the state-building efforts of ISIS in the provinces it has captured from Syria and Iraq. The second phenomenon is transnational terrorism, which has posed a serious threat to peace and stability at both regional and global levels. It would not be wrong to argue that Islamic fundamentalism and jihadism have played a leading role in escalating this phenomenon.

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Nevertheless, the terms *de facto state* and *global jihadism* have rarely been used in the same literature. The establishment of a de facto state is generally locally motivated and stems from the ethnic, religious, or ideological dividedness of a certain society, while jihadism is pursued on a global agenda. In other words, jihadism and de facto statehood had never existed together until the proclamation of ISIS in June 2014, giving birth to a novel phenomenon, the *jihadist de facto state*.[1]

Until the birth of ISIS, jihadist organizations had been labeled as violent non-state actors. The phenomenon of de facto statehood had not been viewed as a condition that shaped the competition among these violent non-state actors. Governments who had jihadist groups operating under their sovereignty had been excluded from this competition. The emergence of ISIS, as a jihadist de facto state, has not only changed the rules of the competition among violent non-state actors but has also included governments in the game. In this sense, one could ask why ISIS has opted to build a de facto state (unlike its predecessors) and how ISIS has utilized the outcomes of this strategy.

This study aims to explore the relationship between de facto statehood and jihadism so as to identify the rationale behind establishing a jihadist de facto state. ISIS, as a unique case, will be examined. There will be a review of the literature on the motivations of de facto states and jihadi terrorism. Once the term *competitive jihadism* is coined a theoretical framework will be proposed to explain how ISIS has taken the advantage of having a de facto state. In order to test the variables presented in the hypothesis, the research includes empirical data obtained from primary sources as released by ISIS and its metropole states. In line with its findings, this study concludes with a discussion of whether regarding the organization as a violent non-state actor and ignoring its de facto statehood could stop ISIS.

2. Survival Strategies of De Facto States

The erosion of Westphalian sovereignty and the emergence of de facto states raise the questions of what defines a state, how de facto states are conceptualized, and why they have been a subject of international politics. According to Krasner, states possess four elements of sovereignty. *International legal sovereignty* refers to juridical independence and international recognition of a state by other states. All rulers seek international legal sovereignty because it provides juridical equality and access to international law. *Westphalian sovereignty* means that the domestic decisions made by internal authority structures are free from interference of external actors. *Domestic sovereignty* is the ability of the domestic political authority to exercise effective control within its borders. Finally, in *interdependence sovereignty* public

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[1] One can argue that the Palestine state represents another example of a jihadist *de facto state*. However, this argument seems to make an over-generalization regarding the role of the jihadist groups over the Palestinian state's regime type. According to Rane, the conflict between Israel and Palestinians has gradually gained an Islamic dimension as an immense disparity among them has become more visible in terms of power and potential. Palestinian groups have adopted jihadism as a strategy to abrogate the power asymmetry that solidifies Israel's existence. That is to say, jihadism has been reformulated and the jihadist groups, which have aimed to counterbalance the Israel's material power and restore the rights of Palestinians, have narrowed down its definition. (Halim Rane, "Reformulating Jihad in the Context of the Israeli–Palestinian Conflict: A Theoretical Framework," *Global Change, Peace & Security* 19, no. 2 (2007): 127-47.) The story of HAMAS, following its landslide parliamentary election victory in January 2006, has demonstrated that Gaza has not turned into a jihadist de facto state. Although HAMAS, as the Gaza wing of Muslim Brotherhood, has not denied its Islamist identity it has managed to isolate the governance from resistance. For example, HAMAS has formed a cabinet composed of technocrats educated in Western institutions on secular fields and kept governance issues away from theological concerns. In addition to that Hamas has also defined its jihadist strategy in a limited manner and has not carried out any deliberate attacks beyond Israel/Palestine zone. This strengthens the idea that HAMAS has characteristics of both political Islam and national resistance and Gaza resembles to a typical de facto state rather than a jihadist de facto state. (Tristan Dunning, *Hamas, Jihad and Popular Legitimacy* (London: Routledge, 2016), 1-3.)

authorities are able to regulate the flow of information, ideas, goods, people, and capital across the borders of their state.[2] These four elements of sovereignty do not necessarily coexist in all states, and even less so now than during the Cold War. A state can have international legal sovereignty but lack domestic sovereignty or vice versa. For example, failed states such as Afghanistan have international recognition but do not have sufficient ability to exercise full control within their own territory. On the other hand, a political authority that is able to exercise full domestic sovereignty can be deprived of international legal sovereignty.

An example that includes the perfect congruence of different types of sovereignty is speculated by Charles Tilly. Accordingly, forming nation-states in the West is a gradual process of war-making, in which the war makers penetrate the society and in return become more and more efficient at performing the functions expected from rulers.[3] Kingston argues that the process Tilly has identified for the West has worked differently in the developing world. The states of the third world have not been able to develop a working-state mechanism. Instead, their rivals have initiated their own movements, which have led to *states-within-states*. In some cases, one sees political entities emerge that are in sharp contrast to the juridical states that rule them—especially in their capacity to control territory, collect taxes, and conduct business with international and transnational actors.[4] Thus, non-state actors such as de facto states have become a major challenge to the legitimacy of sovereign states.

It is then reasonable to argue that de facto states have the characteristics of sovereign states, other than that of being recognized by other sovereign states. As Pegg concludes,

> a de facto state exists where there is an organized political leadership, which has risen to power through some degree of indigenous capability, receives popular support, and has achieved sufficient capacity to provide governmental services to a given population in a specific territorial area, over which effective control is maintained for a significant period of time.[5]

Building on this definition, Pegg pinpoints the goals of de facto states. A de facto state aims to have full constitutional independence and seeks widespread international recognition as a sovereign state. In order to achieve this end, a de facto state enters into relations with other states. De facto states conduct foreign policy in order to protect their independence and pursue their bid for survival.

International politics play a determining role in the recognition of de facto states, although it is international law that defines the conditions that lead an entity to be accepted as a *de jure state*. For a de facto state to be recommended as a member of the United Nations it should receive nine affirmative votes of the 15 members of the Security Council, provided that none of the permanent members have voted against the proposal. A two-thirds majority is then required in the Assembly for the admission of the candidate de facto state. This implies that the diverging strategic interests of the great powers, which can shape the policies of other states as well, might prevent a de facto state from gaining membership status in the UN. In other words, decisions of the UN members are driven by their political calculations, which rarely converge on the same venue to grant membership status to a de facto state. De facto states are typically deprived of the guarantees provided by international law.

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[2]   Stephen Krasner, *Sovereignty: Organized Hypocricy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999), 3-7.

[3]   Charles Tilly, *Coercion, Capital and the European States: AD 990-1992* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1992).

[4]   Paul Kingston, "States within States: Historical and Theoretical Perspectives," in *States within States: Incipent Political Entities in the Post-Cold War Era,* ed. Paul Kingston and Ian Spears (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), 1-13.

[5]   Scott Pegg, *International Society and the De Facto State* (Brookfield: Ashgate, 1998), 26.

Therefore, de facto states are involved in the game of international politics in order to maintain their survival and achieve recognition. There are two leading approaches explaining the strategies that de facto states develop for recognition and survival. The first approach focuses on how third-party states are involved in the sovereignty crisis between a de facto state and metropole state. A de facto state, which struggles against its metropole state, might be supported by a patron state. According to Özpek, "sovereignty problems between parent states and de facto states might present an opportunity for potential patron states to explore such situations for the sake of their national interest".[6] Similarly, Kolstø argues that the patron state of a de facto state regards it's backing as a tool to achieve national interests and/ or extend its regional goals.[7] This argument stems from the essential premises of the Realist School of International Relations discipline. Thus, de facto states are viewed as an instrument of the inter-governmental power game.

Another approach to the same phenomenon is the argument of *competitive democratization*. Unlike the state-centric and power-driven character of the realist perspective, Caspersen suggests that the survival and recognition of a de facto state is much more related to internal dynamics such as democratization, institutionalization, and state building capacity. According to her, democracy has become the legitimate norm since the end of the Cold War, and de facto states use the democratization process in order to justify their struggle in the eyes of the international society. In doing so, de facto states compete with their metropole states by claiming that they are more inclined to adopt *hegemonic international values* such as democracy and human rights. This strategy is called *competitive democratization* and de facto states aim to be identified as 'islands of freedom and stability' so as to gain international recognition. Caspersen argues that Kosovo's independence and partial recognition as a sovereign state (2008) serve as a model of how democracy and state building can lead to being recognized by international democratic actors. [8]

3. The Uniqueness of ISIS

Although these arguments can be applied to any de facto state seeking international recognition, the Islamic State is a unique case. A realist perspective acknowledges that the Islamic State is a proxy of a third-party state. However, it fundamentally challenges the established dynamics of international law and community; ISIS still displays the characteristics of a transnational terrorist organization. It claims responsibility for terrorist attacks targeting civilians in France, Egypt, Turkey, Belgium, Yemen, Tunisia, and the United States. Thus, the sovereign states of the international system are not able to recognize and attempt to build diplomatic relations with the Islamic State. Although politicians and journalists have accused some states of aiding the Islamic State, there is no evidence clear enough to isolate alleged states. This phenomenon undermines the realist perspective's explanatory power, which is based on state-centric assumptions, in explaining the foreign policy behaviors of ISIS.

On the other hand, there is an ontological incongruence between the founding principles of the Islamic State and those of democracy. The leaders of ISIS have utterly rejected democratic values in the state-building process. It should be noted that ISIS subscribes to

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[6]   Burak Bilgehan Özpek, "The Role of Democracy in the Recognition of De Facto States," *Global Governance: A Review of Multilateralism and International Organizations* 20, no. 4 (2014): 585-99.

[7]   Pål Kolstø, "The Sustainability and Future of Unrecognized Quasi-States,*" Journal of Peace Research* 43, no. 6 (2006): 723-40.

[8]   Nina Caspersen, *Unrecognized States* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2012), 53.

Salafism, a theological movement concerned with purifying the faith by eliminating idolatry and emphasizing the God's Oneness.[9] That is to say, Salafism views that democracy claims partnership to God, the divine legislator, in legislation. Clearly then, ISIS does not adopt the strategy of *competitive democratization* in order to attract the support of the international community.

One still needs to explore the question of the survival strategy of ISIS. What makes the Islamic State a survivor in the Middle East even though it does not play the sovereign states' power games and is not instrumental in democratization?

The Islamic State claims to be a Caliphate, an umbrella state for all Muslims, while other jihadi non-state actors have different types of names—be it emirate or organizational—and hierarchies. Moghadam suggests that the Islamic State automatically aims to annihilate all other jihadi groups and to appear as the only legitimate political entity representing the entire Islamic nation. This exceptional stance causes the Islamic State to follow a more ambitious state-building process. Compared with the other jihadi organizations, ISIS is more focused on building institutions for efficient governance and providing order over a certain territory. It's attempts to create a motherland for Muslims enable ISIS to have a de facto state and dissociate itself from other jihadist organizations.[10]

This phenomenon acquires meaning when one considers the methodological discrepancy between Osama Bin-Laden and Abu Musab Al-Zerqawi. Following the US invasion of Afghanistan, Zerqawi left Herat city in 2001 and moved between Iran, Jordan, Syria, and Iraqi Kurdistan over the next 14 months. This helped him expand his network and recruit new fighters. After the fall of the Saddam regime, Zerqawi initiated an insurgency in the 'Sunni Triangle' in coordination with the Al-Qaeda core. Nevertheless, Zerqawi's methodology diverged from Al-Qaeda's strategic paradigm, which was based on maintaining popular support and mobilizing Muslims regardless of their sectarian identity in the global scale. According to the Al-Qaeda leadership, the attacks of the AQI (Al-Qaeda in Iraq) were divisive because they were targeting Shiites and killing innocent Muslims. Under Zarqawi's leadership the AQI was viewed as being more interested in exploiting the local complexities of Iraq than serving the global agenda of Al-Qaeda.[11]

The AQI evolved into ISIS and has managed to build a de facto state using this strategy. The localization of jihadism has made the AQI vulnerable to local level developments. This has produced obstacles as well as opportunities for the AQI. For example, the US counter-insurgency strategy in Iraq between 2006 and 2010 considerably diminished the capacity of the AQI (the Islamic State of Iraq as of 15 October 2006). Conversely, changing regional dynamics such as the Arab Spring, which created a power vacuum in Syria and frustrated Sunni Arab tribes due to the rising authoritarianism of the Baghdad government under the Nouri Al-Maliki rule, opened a window of opportunity for ISI to evolve into ISIS and establish its de facto state. In other words, Zarqawi's strategy of exploiting the local fault lines has worked and allowed ISIS control over a certain territory and government.

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[9] Cole Bunzel, "From Paper State to Caliphate: The Ideology of the Islamic State" (Analysis Paper No. 19, The Brooking Project on U.S. Relations With the Islamic World, Washington DC, 2015).

[10] Assaf Moghadam, "Strategy, not Ideology, Differentiates ISIS from al-Qaida," *The Jerusalem Post,* February 12, 2016, http://www.jpost.com/Middle-East/Strategy-not-Ideology-Differentiates-ISIS-from-Al-Qaida-444710.

[11] M. J. Kirdar, "Al Qaeda in Iraq"(Case Study Number 1, Center for Strategic and International Studies, Washington DC, June 2011).

Examining the literature on competition amongst terrorist organizations makes it easier to understand ISIS's survival strategy. There is a scholarly consensus that a terrorist organization's ability to resort to violence helps it recruit more fighters and maintain group cohesion.[12] Therefore, terrorist groups engage in more violence if a more radical competitor challenges them. For example, the Official Irish Republican Army (OIRA) adopted terrorism as a response to the Provisional Irish Republican Army (PIRA) engaging in terrorist activities. Similarly, secular Palestinian groups began to adopt suicide bombing after fundamentalist organizations used this tactic. According to the research conducted by Young and Dugan, the survival of a terrorist organization in a competitive environment depends on it's capabilities to use different kinds of attacks, kill masses of people, and organize costly attacks.[13] Therefore, it is reasonable to assume that outbidding is a rational strategy for a terrorist organization that aims to maintain its survival.

However, according to Nemeth, there are additional factors to consider when suggesting that competition amongst terrorist organizations can lead to more violence. First of all, groups that share similar ideologies should be compared to one another. For example, a jihadist organization should only be compared with another jihadist group, not an ethic or sectarian one. Secondly, following empirical testing, Nemeth finds that competition itself is not enough to escalate outbidding. Supportive government policy and a social acceptability of violence are also necessary if the competition is to produce more violence. In other words, the occurrence of outbidding is dependent on the political environment and the tolerance of the society that the terrorist organizations claim to represent.[14]

This explains how ISIS has taken advantage of having a de facto state and become the dominant player of the terrorism market in Syrian and Iraq. Using government apparatus in order to gain social acceptability has inspired the terrorist activities of ISIS without stressing the reaction of the society that it claims to represent. According to Fedorov, aided by its monopoly of violence ISIS has initiated an ambitious 'nation building' process and has demonstrated little tolerance for pluralism. In constructing the national identity, ISIS has used coercion to create self and promote antagonism against the other. Using this strategy, it has produced societal approval for its internal activities.[15] Unlike other fundamentalist organizations, ISIS has exploited the benefits of its modern nation state and instruments. As Margvelashvili and Elitsoy suggest, having a de facto state has allowed ISIS to control and command its affiliates whereas Al-Qaeda, without any state-like territory, has experienced difficulties in controlling its members.[16] Therefore, competition amongst terrorist groups is coupled with the comparative advantage of ISIS against other radical Islamist organizations to pave the way for ISIS to impose more violence. ISIS, as the champion of violence, has turned into a magnet and managed to attract foreign fighters and sympathizers.

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[12] See, Mia Bloom, *Dying to Kill: The Allure of Suicide Terror* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005); Audrey Kurth Cronin, "How al-Qaida Ends: The Decline and Demise of Terrorist Groups," *International Security* 31, no. 1 (2006): 7-48; Andrew H. Kydd and Barbara F. Walter, "The Strategies of Terrorism," *International Security* 31, no. 1 (2006): 49-80.

[13] Joseph K. Young and Laura Dugan, "Survival of the Fittest: Why Terrorist Groups Endure," *Perspectives on Terrorism* 8, no. 2 (2014).

[14] Stephen Nemeth, "The Effect of Competition on Terrorist Group Operations," *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 58, no. 2 (2014): 338-40.

[15] Egor Fedorov, "The Islamic State of Iraq and Al-Sham: the Group's Nation-Building Project through the Instrumental Use of Violence," *McGill Journal of Political Studies* 7 (2016): 34-5.

[16] Kristine Margvelashvili and Aslı Elitsoy, "Regional Implications of the Al-Qaeda-ISIL Struggle," *Turkish Policy Quarterly* 14, no. 3 (2015): 84.

It is also evident that the political environment has presented a unique opportunity for ISIS to build a de facto state. Since the beginning of the Syrian civil war, the central authority in Syria has lost control of the territories over which it claims sovereignty. The Iraqi central government has also failed to establish an inclusive central government since the US invasion in 2003. The political environments in Syria and Iraq have allowed ISIS to capture new territories and go on to rule the local people of the land (with the exception of those who have been killed or deported).

Running ISIS as a political institution might help to eliminate other jihadist organizations and monopolize the jihadism market, but it does not suffice to make ISIS a political survivor. In other words, the Islamic State must also be involved in state-level competition to maintain its autonomy. ISIS should compete with its metropole states and their allies in addition to competing with rival jihadist organizations. Jihadism is used as a strategy to claim legitimacy against its metropole state. By using more aggressive jihadi discourse than its metropole states the Islamic State aspires to attract more jihadists to its motherland and to gain recognition in the Muslim nation. Unlike de facto states that seek recognition from the international community, undergo democratization, and swiftly adopt internationally accepted norms, the Islamic State, as a jihadist de facto state, pursues a foreign policy that aims to gain recognition from the Muslim community and adopt an aggressive jihadist policy to attract Muslims. In doing so, the Islamic State competes with its parent states by revealing their jihadist incompetency to Muslims all around the world. ISIS takes advantage of having a state in its fight against other jihadist organizations, and exploits jihadism in order to protect its de facto state from its metropole states.

This policy connotes the term *competitive democratization* as coined by Caspersen. Competitive democratization refers to the strategy of de facto states to gain support of or recognition by third-party states. In doing so, democracy is viewed as a hegemonic norm. De facto states illustrate their ability to develop democracy while highlighting the democratic deficits of their metropole states. ISIS adopts a similar methodology based on competition but replaces democracy with jihadism. The competitive democratization strategy aims to build bridges between de facto states and the democratic members of the international system, while ISIS prefers Muslims, non-state actors, as the target audience. Therefore, its strategy could be called *competitive jihadism*.

However, that ISIS strategically relies on attracting the support of Muslims is not confined to an ideological sympathy. ISIS also summons Muslims to join the jihadist battle. Its aim is to strengthen its military capacity by recruiting foreign fighters. It would not be wrong to argue that military power is the main asset of ISIS as it expands its territory inside Iraq and Syria and captures resources to provide income. According to Humud et al., ISIS takes advantage of its military capabilities to generate revenue mainly through trade of gas and oil. For example, ISIS controls the Deir Ez-zohr region, where locals estimate oil production to be 34,000–40,000 barrels a day. In Iraq and Syria, invasions of ISIS have enabled it to earn revenues from tax and extortion. According to media coverage, the amount of tax collected by ISIS might be as much as $600–900 million annually.[17] ISIS functions as a nation state and imposes fines and fees for utilities such as water and electricity and for services or infractions such as car registrations, college textbooks, and traffic violations. Extortion is

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[17] Pamela Engel, "ISIS Has Found A Huge Moneymaking Method That's Impervious to Sanctions and Air Raids," *Business Insider*, December 2, 2015, http://www.businessinsider.com/isis-taxation-extortion-system-2015-12.

another channel of revenue for ISIS. Although the exact number is not known due to lack of transparency, it is estimated that ISIS stole $500 million from the banks of the occupied cities of Iraq in 2014.[18]

The asset seizure strategy has played a key role in the entrenchment of ISIS's military power. It has captured tanks, vehicles, weapons, and other kind of ammunitions belonging to occupied districts. For instance, during the Ramadi offensive in May 2014, ISIS seized large amounts of military equipment including tanks, armored vehicles, and heavy guns from the arsenals abandoned by the Iraqi Army. Seizing sophisticated weapons and vehicles has beefed up the military capacity of ISIS, and it has become leverage for the jihadist war in Iraq and Syria.

ISIS has also been involved in various business dealings such as the antiquity trade, kidnapping and human trafficking, organ harvesting, illegal drug trade, and donations in order to raise funds. ISIS aims to sustain governance of the territories over which it claims sovereignty. Unlike other jihadist organizations, ISIS runs government agencies, pays regular salaries to government officials, implements welfare programs for the disadvantaged people, and sustains a regular army.

The expansion of ISIS since 2014 demonstrates how it has benefited from using its military strength to exploit resources. This military strength, which stems from jihadist ideology and de facto statehood, has served its survival. The transformation of a terrorist group into a de facto state has created a snowball effect. According to Cronin, ISIS is hardly identified as a terrorist organization even though it uses terrorism as a tactic. Unlike Al-Qaeda-like networks, which have dozens or hundreds of members, ISIS holds an army of about 30,000 fighters. Jihadist networks do not hold territory and are not capable of being involved in a direct military confrontation, while ISIS has a pseudo state led by a conventional army engaging in sophisticated military operations.[19] Foreign jihadist fighters have contributed to the military capabilities of ISIS and its jihadist ideology and de facto statehood have attracted foreign fighters. These factors have helped ISIS take over resources which has been conducive in sustaining itself as a de facto state.

This regenerative cycle might serve as a model to explain the survival strategies of jihadist de facto states. From the perspective of a jihadist de facto state, once sovereignty is proclaimed over a certain territory, competitive jihadism follows. A jihadist de facto state aims to attract a target audience by claiming that it is more jihadist than its metropole state. Foreign jihadist fighters join the holy army of the jihadist de facto state and enhance its military capability. As a result, the jihadi de facto state becomes capable of expanding its territory against the metropole state and capturing sources of revenues to sustain and improve its governance capacity. A jihadist de facto state, which is not recognized by the sovereign states of the international system due to its ideological stance, gains the support of its target audience by being successful at the game of competitive jihadism.

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[18] Nadan Feldman, "How ISIS Became the World's Richest Terror Group," *Haaretz*, November 10, 2015, http://www.haaretz.com/middle-east-news/isis/1.686287.

[19] Audrey Kurth Cronin, "ISIS Is Not a Terrorist Group: Why Counterterrorism Won't Stop the Latest Jihadist Threat," *Foreign Affairs* 94, no. 2 (2015): 87-90.

4. Competitive Jihadism in Syria and Iraq

This conceptual framework explains the capacity of ISIS to survive in a hostile environment, but this argument should be tested. In doing so, we compare the jihadist discourses of ISIS and its metropole states, Syria and Iraq. The table below shows the content of press releases made by the official media outlets of these regimes. We scrutinized press releases on the official web site of the Iraqi government[20] and reports from SANA (Syrian Arab News Agency)[21] and *Dabiq* (an online magazine used by ISIS for propaganda)[22] under eight categories. It should be noted that the ongoing war brands its stamp on all of the news, reports, and articles.[23] We classified their contents in accordance with their main themes as follows:

1. Functions of Government: Contents related to government activities such as infra-structure, transportation, or economy has been coded as '1'. For example, in the fourth issue of *Dabiq*, articles dealing with the social services of ISIS have been coded under this category.

2. Diplomatic Relations with Other States and International Organizations: Contents related to foreign relations including diplomatic visits, bilateral agreements, and joint statements. For example, the meeting held between the Syrian Health Minister and a representative of UNICEF in Syria on 14 September 2015 has been coded under this category.

3. Foreign Connections of the Jihadist Groups: Contents related to the allegations of the Iraqi and Syrian governments about the connections of ISIS with foreign states. For example, articles in which the Syrian government accuses Gulf countries of supporting ISIS have been coded under this category.

4. Cultural and Natural Assets: Contents related to cultural, historical, and natural assets. For example, articles including performances of musicians, exhibitions, and theater plays have been coded under this category.

5. Sports, Art and Tourism: Contents related to sporting, artistic, and touristic activities. For example, the Iraqi Prime Minister Al-Abadi's statement about the Iraqi Olympic team has been coded under this category.

6. Anti-western and Anti-Imperialism: Contents related to the criticism of western countries' policies towards the Middle East. For example, *Dabiq's* articles condemning the Sykes-Picot Agreement have been coded under this category.

7. Fighting Against Jihadism: Contents related to the armed struggle against jihadist groups. For example, the Iraqi and the Syrian armies' operations against ISIS and other jihadist groups have been coded under this category.

8. Jihadism: Contents related to the armed struggle against infidels. For example, *Dabiq's* articles that call Muslims for holy war against infidels have been coded under this category.

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[20] See, Iraq Prime Ministry Official Website, http://pmo.iq/pme/ipresse.htm.
[21] See, SANA (Syrian Arab News Agency), http://sana.sy/en/.
[22] See, *Dabiq Magazine*, www.clarionproject.org .
[23] In this study, we examined the aforementioned publications between the ISIS captured Mosul and declared its de facto state in June 2014 and May 2016, prior to the Mosul and Raqqa operations.

Table 1 - Content of the News, Reports, and Articles Published by the Official Media Bodies of Iraq, Syria, and ISIS[24]

	Iraqi Government (754 releases)	Syrian Government (131 releases)	ISIS(149 releases)
Functions of Government (Health, Technology, Military, Economy, Social Services, Education, Military)	173 (%22.9)	18 (%13.7)	11 (%7.3)
Diplomatic Relations with Other States and International Organizations	255 (%33.8)	8 (%6.1)	0
Foreign Relations of the Jihadist Groups	0	15 (%11.4)	15 (%10)
Cultural and Natural Assets	0	20 (%15.2)	0
Sports, Art and Tourism	1 (%0.13)	26 (%20.6)	0
Anti-western and Anti-imperialist	11 (%1.4)	22 (%16.7)	35 (%23.4)
Fighting Against Jihadism	210 (%27.8)	37 (%28.2)	0
Jihadism	25 (%3.3)	0	72 (%48.3)

As Table 1 shows, ISIS underlines its capacity to govern as effectively as Syria and Iraq. Of the articles published in *Dabiq*, 7.3% are related to the state-building efforts of ISIS while this number is 22.9% for Iraq and 13.7% for Syria. It is relevant to note that these actors behave as if there is no civil war and aim to demonstrate their ability to provide order as well as governmental services. Nevertheless, regarding diplomatic relations with other states and international organizations, ISIS radically deviates from Syria and Iraq. It does not have any diplomatic contact with recognized states and organizations in the international system. Conversely, Syria underlines its close relations with Russia and UNESCO, and the Iraqi government's website covers diplomatic relations extensively in order to demonstrate the international solidarity against ISIS. ISIS uses this opportunity to exploit and reflect these diplomatic relations as a collaboration of the Damascus and Baghdad governments with the Christian states against Muslims.

Nonetheless, 11.4% of the SANA reports argue that ISIS is not a 'solitary man' and that it has secret ties with the US, Israel, Qatar, Turkey, and Saudi Arabia. The Syrian regime propagandizes that ISIS is an artificial project of third-party states. The Iraqi government does not accuse any international states of backing ISIS, probably because of the need for diplomatic support. Contrary to the claims of the Syrian regime, *Dabiq* does not include any articles on the foreign relations of ISIS. Instead, it underlines the solitary character of ISIS. ISIS does not only present serious challenges to the sovereign states but also criticizes non-state actors such as Al-Qaeda, PKK, and the Shiite groups. As evident in the table, under the category 'foreign relations of the jihadist groups,' ten percent of the articles published in *Dabiq* accuse these groups either of being deviant or collaborating with imperialism. Thus, it is safe to argue that ISIS aims to present itself as a heroic figure fighting a solitary battle against an entirely corrupt system.

In regards to the non-political categories such as culture, nature, sports, art, and archeology, the Syrian regime deliberately highlights the assets of the country and aims to use these assets as a soft power strategy. This is a message to the international society: Do not allow such a rich culture and civilization to be captured and destroyed by ISIS and other

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[24]   a) News, reports and articles on social events and ceremonies are not included in the table. b) A report, news or article might include more than one direct theme.

Islamist groups. On the other hand, the Iraqi regime shows almost no interest in such issues. This negligence might be because it is easy for the Iraqi government obtain support of other states. Unsurprisingly, *Dabiq* magazine does not include any articles in these categories.

An examination of the anti-western and anti-imperialist articles of *Dabiq* magazine indicates ISIS's strategy to appeal to Muslims. Accordingly, 23.4% of the articles harshly criticize western values, the United States, and the existing world order. In doing so, the ISIS regime defines the Western world as crusaders and the source of the problems that the Middle East has been experiencing since the Sykes-Picot Agreement. To a lesser extent, the Syrian government also criticizes the imperialistic moves of other states and, as mentioned previously, argues that there are secret ties between ISIS and the western states. In addition, the Syrian regime also uses anti-Zionist, anti-Western, and patriotic rhetoric in 16.7% of it's reports to promote nationalism. It should be noted that the Iraqi government adopts a patriotic stance without using radical language to blame the western states and Israel. However, 1.4% of the news of the Iraqi government expresses specific discontent over Turkey's cross-border penetrations.

Fighting jihadism is the most popular subject addressed by the Syrian and Iraqi media outlets. Accordingly, the share of the news about struggles against ISIS is 27.8% for Iraq and 28.2% for Syria. It should be noted that the Syrian government uses the terms *jihadist* and *terrorist* interchangeably and defines the armed opposition as either holistically jihadist or terrorist, while the Iraqi government directly addresses ISIS. Needless to say, ISIS, as the pioneer of the jihadism in Iraq and Syria, has no reservations about jihadism.

On the other hand, there is no jihadist discourse in the reports of SANA. It is the product of the secular character of the Ba'athist ideology in Syria. The Iraqi government behaves pragmatically and prefers to use jihadism as a strategy to mobilize people against ISIS. According to news releases, the Iraqi government seeks the assistance of Shiite clerics in obtaining a *jihad fatwa* (opinion or interpretation of a qualified religious scholar) against ISIS. That is why the Iraqi government website released 25 news reports condemning ISIS using Islamic references. However, this strategy seems to attract and mobilize Shiite groups rather than undermine the popular support of ISIS. It can then be argued that the jihadist policy of the Baghdad government might deepen the sectarian tensions further and trigger the occurrence of *alternative jihadisms*. Evidently, as seen in Table 1, jihadism is the dominant subject matter of *Dabiq* magazine.

This shows that ISIS disseminates four messages to its target audience. The first is that ISIS has governance capacity and acts as a sovereign state. Second, it competes with other non-state armed groups and identifies them as tools of imperialism. Third, ISIS uses anti-western and anti-imperialist discourse and morally condemns the states with Muslim populations due to their diplomatic relations with western states. Finally, ISIS aims to establish a monopoly over jihadism. On the other hand, the Syrian and the Iraqi regimes seem to have failed to meet the challenges posed by ISIS. For example, the Iraqi government's enthusiasm to get diplomatic support from international society is identified as 'collaborating with imperialism' by ISIS. Similarly, ISIS criticizes the Syrian government's secular, nationalist, and modernist stance within the framework of jihadism.[25] ISIS, as an unrecognized entity, has no systemic

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25 Ahmed S. Hashim, "The Islamic State: From al-Qaeda Affiliate to Caliphate: The Evolution of the Islamic State of Iraq and

responsibility toward the other states of the international society and it believes that the Islamic worldview is categorically superior to other kinds of secular ideologies. It then has a free hand to judge its metropole states' policies based on pragmatism and rationalism in moral terms. In a final analysis, the jihadist and anti-imperialist market, which potentially includes foreign fighters, is overwhelmed by the radical and self-righteous ideology of ISIS.

Competitive jihadism is a game played by ISIS, which allows it to strengthen its military capabilities by recruiting foreign fighters. Building on this research, one could assume that ISIS, through its success in the competitive jihadism game, has attracted a considerable number of foreign fighters. Although it is not possible to obtain exact numbers, it is still possible to follow the influx of foreign fighters to ISIS.

According to Combatting Terrorism Center's report, *Caliphate's Global Workforce: An Inside Look at the Islamic State's Foreign Fighter Paper Trail*, the overall number of foreign fighters that arrived in Syria until mid-2013 was not more than 5,000.[26] In May 2014, the Soufan Group's report indicated that by governments' estimations there were 12,000 foreign fighters from 81 countries in Syria and Iraq. This number increases to 18,000 at the end of 2014[27] and to 22,000 by January 2015. According to the Soufan Group's calculations, this number increases to 31,000 people from 86 countries by December 2015.[28] These estimates are corroborated by the statements of intelligence officers. For example, in February 2016, US National Intelligence Director James Clapper estimated that more than 36,000 foreign fighters from 120 countries have joined ISIS in Syria and Iraq since 2012.[29]

However, the influx of foreign fighters started to decrease in 2016. According to senior US army officers, the inpouring of foreign fighters to the Islamic State has dropped from 1500–2000 to 200 fighters per month.[30] Nevertheless, such a sharp decrease does not mean that jihadism has suddenly lost its attraction. This can instead be attributed to a show of force by the metropole states and their external allies (such as the US and Russia) to intimidate ISIS in Iraq and Syria. For example, when US-backed offensives escalated in Northern Syria the Iraqi army launched an operation to liberate Fallujah in early 2016. It would also not be wrong to argue that Turkey has considerably tightened control over the Syrian border since late 2015. In order to see the progress, one can compare the numbers of foreign fighters caught in 2015 and 2016. Turkey prevented 1136 foreign fighters from infiltrating into Syria between 1 January 2016 and 17 April 2016,[31] whereas only 280 fighters were prevented in the initial four months of 2015.[32]

Syria (ISIS)," *Middle East Policy Journal* 11, no. 4 (2014): 69-83.

26 Brian Dodwell et. al., "Caliphate's Global Workforce : An inside Look at the Islamic State's Foreign Fighter Paper Trail"(CTS Reports, Combatting Terrorism Center at West Point, Zurich, April 2016).

27 "ISIL Foreign Fighters : From Zero to Hero," *Global Security,* June 2016*,* http://www.globalsecurity.org/military/world/para/isil-2-4.htm.

28 Richard Barrett, *Foreign Fighters: An Updated Assessment of the Flow of Foreign Fighters into Syria and Iraq* (New York: The Soufan Group, 2015).

29 Barrett, *Foreign Fighters.*

30 "Fewer Foreign Fighters Joining Islamic State," *Reuters,* April 26, 2016, http://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-recruiting-idUSKCN0XN2FO.

31 "Sınırda yakalanan IŞİD'li sayısı açıklandı" [Number of the ISIS members captured at the Turkey-Syria border], *Sputnik News*, January 30, 2016, accessed September 20, 2016, http://sptnkne.ws/a7nY.

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5. Conclusion

The debates dealing with ISIS address how ISIS is conceptualized, what its aim is, and how it has successfully retained a core sovereignty zone. This study attempts to answer these questions by proposing that ISIS is a de facto state and uses jihadism as a survival strategy. In doing so, the term competitive jihadism is used to argue that ISIS competes with its metropole states, Syria and Iraq, on the basis of jihadism. This is a deliberate strategy, which aims to attract Muslims inclined to radicalization and to recruit foreign fighters by showing the jihadist deficits of the metropole states. As the research shows, ISIS is successful at this game and has managed to become a magnet for foreign fighters. Thus, it has managed to increase its military capabilities and has continued to survive.

The findings of this study also help us to analyze how ISIS will evolve if it is swept out of Mosul and Raqqa in the future. In this scenario, the status of ISIS is expected to reduce from a de facto state to a violent non-state political actor and it will be involved in competition with other jihadist organizations. Moghadam argues that ISIS competes with other jihadist organizations and takes advantage of having a state. Considering the number of articles that underline the governing capacity of ISIS and the declining influence of Al-Qaeda in Syria and Iraq, Moghadam's argument gains ground. Losing sovereignty will inevitably de-potentiate ISIS and its local agenda. This might pave the way for ISIS to pursue a global and unpredictable agenda. Furthermore, the disappearance of ISIS, as a magnet for foreign fighters, might give rise to homegrown radicalization. On the other hand, in the absence of ISIS, other terrorist organizations might adopt similar strategies and build jihadist de facto states in order to attract jihadists and sustain their own survival. Once Pandora's Box has been opened, it may be hard to get it closed again.

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