

Correspondence

Ideological Extremism in Armed Conflict

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To the Editors (Max Abrahms writes):

In "The Extremist's Advantage in Civil Wars," Barbara Walter seeks to explain the rise of radical Islamist groups in civil wars since 2003, especially Salafist groups.¹ She claims that ideologically extreme groups have an organizational edge and thus outperform more moderate groups. This thesis is unpersuasive, however, because of its shaky empirical basis.

Walter's core assumption is that an extreme ideology helps groups attract support. Her definition of ideology encompasses their political preferences and the tactics used to achieve them. As she states, ideology is "a set of beliefs about the proper order of society and how it can be achieved" (p. 15). Walter expresses skepticism, though, in rating the extremeness of groups based on their conduct, perhaps because of the mounting empirical research showing that moderate groups attract disproportionate support.² Indeed, a common way for groups to end is by acting too extreme, as doing so dries up support.³ Examples include extreme Salafist groups such as the Armed Islamic Group of Algeria, Egypt's al-Gama'a al-Islamiyya, al-Qaida in Iraq, and the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS).

Walter offers two explanations to support her argument that extremists elicit more support. First, moderate groups are less likely to achieve their political goals. Yet, large-n empirical studies show that groups hinder bargaining success when they adopt more extreme means, ends, or both.⁴ Second, Muslims turn to Salafi jihadist groups because they offer higher-quality governance. As Salman Rushdie notes, however,

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1. Barbara F. Walter, "The Extremist's Advantage in Civil Wars," *International Security*, Vol. 42, No. 2 (Fall 2017), pp. 7–39, doi:10.1162/ISEC_a_00292. Further references to this article appear parenthetically in the text.

2. Maria J. Stephan and Erica Chenoweth, "Why Civil Resistance Works: The Strategic Logic of Nonviolent Conflict," *International Security*, Vol. 33, No. 1 (Summer 2008), pp. 7–44, doi:10.1162/isec.2008.33.1.7; and Jessica A. Stanton, *Violence and Restraint in Civil War: Civilian Targeting in the Shadow of International Law* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016).

3. Audrey Kurth Cronin, *How Terrorism Ends: Understanding the Decline and Demise of Terrorist Campaigns* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2009).

4. Max Abrahms, "Why Terrorism Does Not Work," *International Security*, Vol. 31, No. 2 (Fall 2006), pp. 42–78, doi:10.1162/isec.2006.31.2.42; and Claude Berrebi, "The Economics of Terrorism and Counterterrorism: What Matters and Is Rational-Choice Theory Helpful?" in Paul K. Davis and Kim Cragin, eds., *Social Science for Counterterrorism: Putting the Pieces Together* (Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND Corporation, 2009), pp. 189–190.

“Everywhere that this phenomenon has actually taken power, it’s very quickly become hated.”⁵ Survivors agree that “the people hated” ISIS’s rule.⁶ Relatively moderate rivals such as the Free Syrian Army, Ahrar al-Sham, and even Jabhat al-Nusra were always more popular among Syrians and external backers, particularly Sunni Gulf states and Turkey. Although ISIS attracted more foreign fighters, its attrition rate quickly exceeded the recruitment rate, as the international community assembled the largest counterterrorist coalition in history to target it.⁷ Walter argues incorrectly that Salafi jihadists “remained militarily relevant much longer than [its] moderate rivals” in Syria (p. 31). At the time of this writing, however, Afrin is teeming with Free Syrian Army members, and Idlib is dominated by the Nusra-led Hay’at Tahrir al-Sham umbrella group, while ISIS has been expunged from its Raqqa stronghold.

Walter claims that leaders such as Islamic State’s Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi feign extremeness to appeal to ideologically pure members of the rank and file. Yet, Baghdadi was far more ideological than most of his supporters.⁸ As with other militant groups, ISIS’s leadership has been more ideologically devoted and knowledgeable than its foot soldiers.⁹ Across militant groups, ideological fluency is a common prerequisite for rising to the top.¹⁰

Walter struggles to show how adopting an extreme ideology helps leaders overcome organizational challenges. She maintains that Salafi jihadism enables leaders to screen out less capable, ideologically vacillating recruits. ISIS is notorious, however, for its weak vetting standards and became a repository for mentally unstable fighters with a poor grasp of Islam who ended up defecting in droves.¹¹ Poor vetting is a hallmark of Salafism. Like praying, jihad is an individualized act independent of a centralized hierarchy.¹² For jihadists, there is no authority other than Allah.

Walter argues that extreme ideologies have been rising in civil wars since 2003 for instrumental reasons rather than ideological appeal. The rise of religious extremism is hardly limited to recent civil wars, however. Since the Iranian Revolution in 1979, militants have gravitated to religious extremism inside and outside of civil wars.¹³ Salafism is the fastest-growing Islamic movement around the world from Azerbaijan to China, India, Indonesia, and Singapore—and even in the West. Regionalists attribute its

5. “Fareed Zakaria GPS,” CNN, transcript, November 19, 2017.

6. Patrick Cockburn, “ISIS in Iraq: The Brutal Reality of Life in Mosul under Islamic State,” *Independent*, November 9, 2014.

7. Heather Murdock, “Analysts: Islamic State’s Explicit Media Gore May Backfire,” *VOA NEWS*, July 30, 2015, <https://www.voanews.com/a/islamic-state-explicit-media-gore-may-backfire/2887002.html>.

8. Fawaz A. Gerges, *ISIS: A History* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2017).

9. Max Abrahms and Philip B.K. Potter, “Explaining Terrorism: Leadership Deficits and Militant Group Tactics,” *International Organization*, Vol. 69, No. 2 (Spring 2015), pp. 311–342, doi:10.1017/S0020818314000411.

10. Aldon D. Morris and Suzanne Staggenborg, “Leadership in Social Movements,” in David A. Snow, Sarah A. Soule, and Hanspeter Kriesi, eds., *The Blackwell Companion to Social Movements* (Malden, Mass.: Blackwell, 2004), pp. 171–196.

11. Peter Bergen, “What Empowers ISIS,” *CNN.com*, November 5, 2015, <https://www.cnn.com/2015/11/05/opinions/bergen-isis-on-a-roll/index.html>; and Ahmet Altindal, “As Fighters Flee ISIS We Should Be Worried about the Group They’re About to Join,” *Independent*, August 24, 2017.

12. Shiraz Maher, *Salafi-Jihadism: The History of an Idea* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016).

13. David C. Rapoport, “The Fourth Wave: September 11 in the History of Terrorism,” *Current History*, December 2001, p. 419.

growing popularity to one main factor—Saudi backing of Wahhabi missionaries and mosques.¹⁴ Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman recently committed Saudi Arabia to combating Islamist extremism not because it helps Islamist groups, but because the extremeness risks tarnishing the image of Islam and reducing its number of supporters.¹⁵

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To the Editors (Jonathan Leader Maynard and Kai Thaler write):

In “The Extremist’s Advantage in Civil Wars,” Barbara Walter attempts to explain the proliferation of extremist groups in armed conflicts—a surprising phenomenon, she suggests, because extremists’ goals are “far more radical than those of the populations they seek to represent.”¹ Her explanation focuses on the instrumental advantages that extremism provides: “Under certain conditions, rebel leaders . . . have strong incentives to embrace an extreme ideology even if they do not believe the ideas that underlie it. The same is true of more moderate citizens who choose to support or associate with these groups” (p. 8).

Walter’s analysis advances a growing literature on ideology’s role in armed conflict, but her characterization of moderates’ role in extremists’ success strikes us as dubious. To begin, we question her premise that extremist groups generally need “the support of at least some of the moderate citizens” (p. 17). The largest extremist groups in Syria and Iraq typically number tens of thousands of fighters out of a local adult population of 36 million, with many drawing heavily on foreign fighters.² Such groups may need little popular support, especially if, like the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS), they have access to foreign funding or natural resource rents. Indeed, contra Walter’s emphasis, extremist groups often alienate, spurn, or massacre moderates.³ None of this, however, prevents extremists from building effective fighting forces. These forces, not moderate support, are the principal foundation for their observable successes.

14. See Jonathan Kaiman, “In China, Rise of Salafism Fosters Suspicion and Division among Muslims,” *Los Angeles Times*, February 1, 2016; and Emil Souleimanov and Maya Ehrmann, “The Rise of Militant Salafism in Azerbaijan and Its Regional Implications,” *Middle East Policy*, Vol. 20, No. 3 (2013), pp. 111–120, doi:10.1111/mepo.12037.

15. Noor Nugali, “Allied against Terror: Islamic Coalition Agree to Boost Military Capabilities against Threats,” *Arab News*, November 27, 2017, <http://www.arabnews.com/node/1199766/saudi-arabia>.

1. Barbara F. Walter, “The Extremist’s Advantage in Civil Wars,” *International Security*, Vol. 42, No. 2 (Fall 2017), pp. 7–39, at p. 7, doi:10.1162/ISEC_a_00292. Further references to this article appear parenthetically in the text.

2. Jim Sciutto, Jamie Crawford, and Chelsea J. Carter, “ISIS Can ‘Muster’ between 20,000 and 31,500 Fighters, CIA Says,” *CNN.com*, September 12, 2014, <http://edition.cnn.com/2014/09/11/world/meast/isis-syria-iraq/index.html>.

3. Alexander Thurston, “Algeria’s GIA: The First Major Armed Group to Fully Subordinate Jihadism to Salafism,” *Islamic Law and Society*, Vol. 24, No. 4 (2017), pp. 412–436, doi:10.1163/15685195-00244P05; Mohammed M. Hafez, “The Curse of Cain: Why Fratricidal Jihadis Fail to Learn from Their Mistakes,” *CTC Sentinel*, Vol. 10, No. 10 (October 2017), pp. 1–7; and Daniel

We recognize that extremist groups still need some acquiescence from populations in areas they control. Once an armed group dominates any territory, though, it can incentivize cooperation through threats or material inducements. Strong collective-action problems also impede organized resistance, even when most citizens reject the group's aims. Such conditions create powerful incentives for "preference falsification"—public compliance with the group's ideology despite private disagreement—making it difficult for citizens to estimate underlying antipathy toward extremism or to coordinate opposition.⁴

We still agree that extremist ideologies are sometimes instrumentally useful. Walter's ability to explain such utility is hampered, however, by her assumption that extremist appeals sincerely resonate only with fanatical "ideologues." By contrast, in her theory political entrepreneurs only seek victory and power, while moderate citizens support whichever political elites are most likely to win and then institute policies suiting moderates' preferences. Yet if ideologues are a small minority, this makes extremism's instrumental value puzzling. Extremist appeals may help recruit fighters and invoke religiously authorized enforcement mechanisms (pp. 18–20), but they are unlikely to have these effects if target audiences consider the ideology mere "cheap talk." Consequently, most of the benefits of extremism that Walter identifies still require a large number of committed ideologues.

Two mechanisms could explain why even those who reject extremist appeals would still respond to them in ways that extremist groups could find useful. First, Walter claims that extremist groups' ability to mobilize ideologues creates a reputation for combat effectiveness, which then "attract[s] more moderate citizens . . . drawn to the group because of its dominance on the battlefield" (pp. 20–21). We agree, but because this mechanism takes effect after extremists have successfully outcompeted moderate alternatives, it does little to explain that success.

The second mechanism is that extremist ideology solves a commitment problem. Walter suggests that moderates deem extremists more credible agents for delivering post-conflict reforms, because extremism is a "costly signal," because extremists will hold out for far-reaching changes, and because extremist groups contain more "true believers" who will hold leaders to their agendas (pp. 23–26). We are skeptical of this rationalist reconstruction, and Walter provides little empirical evidence to demonstrate that moderates think this way. Her argument might hold if moderates want reform in some generalized sense, with extremists' specific ambitions mattering less than their credibility to institute changes. But this is implausible: if moderates reject all extremist claims, this implies a large gap between moderates' and extremists' political preferences. Indeed, although Walter notes ISIS's recruitment of some Free Syrian Army fighters (pp. 20–21), secular groups or moderate Islamist groups have often resisted joining ISIS precisely out of an aversion to extremism—instead, actively resisting extremists or even considering alliances with government forces.⁵

Byman, "Understanding the Islamic State—A Review Essay," *International Security*, Vol. 40, No. 4 (Spring 2016), pp. 127–165, doi.org/10.1162/ISEC_r_00235.

4. Timur Kuran, "Now Out of Never: The Element of Surprise in the East European Revolution of 1989," *World Politics*, Vol. 44, No. 1 (October 1991), pp. 7–48, doi:10.2307/2010422.

5. "Facing Jihadist Attack, Syrian Rebels Join Bigger Faction," Reuters, January 26, 2017, <https://>

Walter's two mechanisms become more plausible, however, if one rejects common but excessively instrumental portrayals of ideology,⁶ and recognizes that elements of extremists' ideological claims can have meaning and resonance even for individuals who are not themselves extremist ideologues. This could explain, for instance, why individuals who reject the radicalism of extremists' broader political programs might nevertheless accept their legitimating frames for violence or consider a gamble on extremists a palatable option. It also would explain why many endorse extremist claims when they provide no advantage at all.

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www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-syria-rebels/facing-jihadist-attack-syrian-rebels-join-bigger-faction-idUSKBN15A0ON; Kim Sengupta, "Syrian Rebels Consider Joining Forces with Regime Troops to Fight al-Qa'ida," *Independent*, December 13, 2013; and Haid Haid, *Local Community Resistance to Extremist Groups in Syria: Lessons from Atarib* (London: Chatham House, 2017).

6. Although Walter suggests that focusing on ideology's instrumental benefits diverges from existing scholarly wisdom (p. 10), instrumental usage is arguably the more accepted role for ideology in conflict scholarship. See Francisco Gutiérrez Sanín and Elisabeth Jean Wood, "Ideology in Civil War: Instrumental Adoption and Beyond," *Journal of Peace Research*, Vol. 51, No. 2 (2014), pp. 213–226, doi:10.1177/0022343313514073.

Editors' Note: Barbara Walter stands by the arguments in her article.