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The Grand Strategy of Nonstate Actors: Theory and Implications

Author Biography

Garrett Pierman is a second-year PhD student in Political Science at Florida International University, focusing on Political Theory and International Relations. His research interests are primarily in normative political theory as well as the role that ideology and religion play in violence of the structural, interpersonal, and interstate varieties. He also frequently considers the role of technology in human lives as well as defining the forces of globalism as they relate to ideology and violence.

Abstract

This article addresses the Realist assumption that only actors that are states can be considered to have a strategic culture. The primary issue raised is the question of the ability of non-state actors to have a strategic culture. Al-Qaida is used as a theoretical case study. Ultimately this article rejects the idea of territoriality in strategic culture formulation and calls for academics and policymakers alike to adopt a broader conception of actors on the international stage. This broader conception of actors would necessitate rich case studies to be done in the future in order to seek an understanding of the strategic culture of the non-state actors which academics and policymakers must deal with in the modern security environment. In particular, the article finds that the assumptions held about al-Qaida thus far are wrong and, in reality, the group has ambitions that are cosmic in nature, which will necessitate change in the strategies used to fight against terrorism.

Introduction

It is clear that one of the main problems facing the United States and her allies in the twenty-first century is the problem of combating non-state actors, in particular al-Qaida. In seeking to address the problem of the war against terrorism from a social-scientific standpoint, this work asks and addresses three key questions. The first asks whether or not a non-state actor can have a strategic culture. Second, this work addresses the question of the possibility of grand strategy among non-state actors. Following the discussion on those two theoretical questions, a more policy-oriented question is considered: What implications do the strategic culture and grand strategy of non-state actors, al-Qaida in particular, have for the United States' continuation of the war against terrorism? Ultimately, this article finds that it is reasonable to conclude that al-Qaida does, in fact, have a strategic culture, assuming one rejects the mainstream Realist argument that only actors with territory ought to be considered for analysis in terms of strategic culture. Rather, any group which has a shared identity, historical narrative, shared culture, and long-term goals can be considered to have a strategic culture.

Epistemological Framework

The first question posed in the introductory section of this work concerns whether or not a non-state actor can have a strategic culture. It is worth noting that there is an explicit purpose to discussing strategic culture before covering grand strategy. In order to answer the question of strategic culture in non-state actors, it is necessary to define strategic culture. For the purposes of this work, a parsimonious definition is adopted; this is for two reasons. First, the attempt herein is to parse out the key, structural elements to strategic culture. That is to say, the goal is to determine the logical skeleton which supports other ideas of strategic culture. Second, the literature suggests the necessary conclusion that the idea of strategic culture is highly prone to concept stretching to the point of losing analytical leverage on the subject matter. If the question, "what matters in the formation of strategic thought?" is met with the answer "everything matters," there is clearly some flaw in the analytical logic. Therefore, the brief exploration of the literature herein aims to arrive at a definition of strategic culture that is both short and useful.

Strategic Culture Defined

Snyder offers the basic framework for strategic culture, the idea that, for various cultural and historical reasons, different actors think about strategy in

different ways. Upon this framework, other compelling ideas that may have explanatory power ought to be placed to add analytical leverage. Ken Booth's work, *Strategy and Ethnocentrism* begins this process.¹ He offers a tripartite definition of ethnocentrism, which encompasses ideas of racial superiority, poorly done social science, and ethnocentrism "as a synonym for being culture bound."² Of additional definitional relevance is cultural relativism, the idea that each of us sees the world (and formulates strategy) through a cultural, socialized lens.³

In his seminal report on Soviet strategic culture, Snyder offers the following, which allows the careful reader to construct a very basic definition of strategic culture:

"Individuals are socialized into a distinctively Soviet mode of strategic thinking. As a result of this socialization process, a set of general beliefs, attitudes, and behavioral patterns with regard to nuclear strategy has achieved a state of semi-permanence that places them on the level of "culture" rather than mere "policy."...[N]ew problems are not assessed objectively. Rather, they are seen through the perceptual lens provided by the strategic culture."⁴

Snyder, speaking to the context of the Cold War, roughly conceptualizes strategic culture as a socialized set of values, priorities, and ideas that shape the logical calculus of actors over long periods of time. While Snyder thinks in terms of the Soviet nuclear strategy, these ideas presuppose neither state-ness nor territoriality of actors as necessary, *a-priori* concepts.

Booth further offers fifteen propositions which will not be specifically enumerated here; however, this summary of his theoretical posits may prove useful:

- Strategists view the world in an ethnocentric manner, which has sometimes led to tactical and strategic mistakes.
- Strategists have been incurious about their own and others' thinking, which ought to change.
- The rational man is a tool which has outlived its utility.

¹ Booth, Ken, *Strategy and Ethnocentrism* (New York: Holmes & Meier, 1979).

² *Ibid*, 15.

³ *Ibid*, 16-17.

⁴ Snyder, Jack, *The Soviet Strategic Culture: Implications for Limited Nuclear Operations* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND, 1977).

- Cultural relativism is a useful tool for understanding the strategic world more accurately and, ultimately, a step toward building good strategy.⁵

Essentially, Booth can be understood as taking the ideas first formed by Snyder and adding the ethnocentric element to the historical analysis of culture. This is framed within a critique of American strategic thinking which, Booth argues, we assume is the only rational way of thinking out there. Instead, Booth argues, we ought to think in terms of cultural relativism. That is to say, we need to learn why Americans think and act like Americans, why Russians act like Russians, and, for the purposes of this paper, why members of al-Qaida act as such.

The following serves as a working definition of Strategic culture: *Strategic Culture* is the socialized sets of norms, values, and priorities, which change with time and are informed by a shared, group identity, which informs the logic of an actor's strategic thought.

The State-ness Issue in Grand Strategic Thought

In the thinking of Snyder, Booth, and others on the issue of strategic thought, the discussion seems to be nearly unanimously framed in terms of states. Snyder, for instance, wrote his piece in 1977. At that time the Soviet Union, a state actor, was the primary threat as perceived in the United States. This is not the case in 2015. What is more important than simply considering states to be the primary actors is consideration of what about states makes them actors in creating and implementing strategic culture. There are four requirements in the formation of a strategic culture at the group level:

- Self-determined sense of identity as a group.
- A defined historical narrative.
- A leadership structure.
- A culturally relative and logical means-ends thought process.

These four characteristics will be met by states with little critique from those more traditional Realist thinkers. But this work departs from the tradition of Waltz, Snyder, Booth and others by rejecting the idea of territoriality being necessary for an actor to be considered an important participant in the international system.

⁵ Ibid, 17-20.

To illustrate this reasoning on the lack of territoriality in the non-territorial definition of strategic culture, the historical case of Israel is useful. It is clear to even the most casual student of the history of the Middle East that the nation of Israel existed long before the modern nation-state of Israel. A group of people came together with a shared, Jewish identity under the historical narrative of Jewish homeland in Israel, under one leadership structure wherein the logical choice made was to declare the state of Israel and defend it.⁶ The Israeli case makes it clear that a nation (defined as a group of people sharing the first three characteristics identified, basically the idea of an *us*) can have a shared strategic culture.

In keeping with the idea of the Israeli case, a side note on recognition is important. Several nation states do not recognize Israel; that does not make it less of a state. The important thing is that the Israelis recognize Israel. It does not matter, following the same logic, whether or not we in the West recognize al-Qaida as a legitimate political actor or state: this group considers itself a political actor in shared identity, history, and ideas, therefore it ought to be considered an actor according to the four-part definition of a group that has a strategic culture as proposed in this work.

Al- Qaida and Strategic Culture Formation

In determining whether or not al-Qaida has a strategic culture, the logical place to start is the relevant chapter in the masterfully edited volume, *Strategic Culture and Weapons of Mass Destruction*. The work addresses the key question of this section rather directly, albeit in terms of the group's supposed desire to acquire a nuclear weapon. Overall, the authors agree that al-Qaida does have a strategic culture and provides reinforcing evidence to the four theorized criteria provided.⁷ Specifically, Johnson et al. point out that Bin Laden acted as a "mujtahid"⁸ who fashioned a coherent doctrine, citing events of the twentieth century and ideas of Sunni nationalism which made a war against those who oppose the constructed ideology of the group (the governments of the United States, Saudi Arabia, and Israel in particular), a necessary and logical step for those buying into the radical Sunni ideology.⁹ Additionally, the author cites myriad internal documents which indicate that

⁶Rogan, Eugene, *The Arabs, A History* (New York: Basic Books, 2009).

⁷ Johnson, Jeanie, Kerry Kartchner, and Jeffery Larsen (eds.) *Strategic Culture and Weapons of Mass Destruction* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009).

⁸ One who interprets Islamic history: not a prophet, but a leader, especially in the Sunni tradition.

⁹ Johnson et al., *Strategic Culture*, 202-210.

al-Qaida is fighting a planned, politically-motivated war in which violence is condoned, but does have clear rules, although they are rules we in the West do not follow.¹⁰

This idea of a Sunni nationality, promulgated by Bin Laden and others, speaks to the first requirement in creating a strategic culture: a shared identity. An individual may consider himself part of a Sunni nation that transcends borders rather than an Iraqi, for instance. The clear historical narrative Long outlines presents in some detail that, indeed, al-Qaida has a clearly self-determined place in history. Founded in Qutb's notions of Jihad read through the lens of Wahhabism, a particular view of Islam, with its prescriptive notions of violence, al-Qaida's shared identity transcends the nation states of the region and is cosmic in nature.¹¹ Ideologically, the group is reactionary against secular Arab Nationalism, the colonial borders of Sykes-Picot, and revolutionary in the expansionist Wahabi sense of the word, a sense which is both deeply sectarian in its thinking and expansionist in its ideology.¹²

The leadership structure of al-Qaida has well-defined goals: driving the West out of the region and causing damage to those they find in violation of their reading of Islamic principles.¹³ It is with this in mind that it can be ultimately concluded that al-Qaida has a strategic culture. Through a careful study of the group, one comes to the conclusion that, within their own socialized framework and strategic logic, members of al-Qaida are behaving rationally.

Conclusions and Implications for Western Strategy in the Global War on Terror: Understanding the Grand Strategy of Al-Qaida

Thus far, this work has argued that al-Qaida has a strategic culture and a grand strategy. Essentially, this article attempts to convince the reader that territoriality is not a deciding factor in determining whether a particular actor is appropriate for strategic analysis. Rather, an actor must have a shared history and identity along with a narrative that suggests action. In that regard, the main contribution herein, on theoretical terms, is the idea that non-state actors can be considered in terms of their strategic culture. What

¹⁰ Ibid, 210-212.

¹¹ Juergensmeyer, Mark, *Terror in the Mind of God; The Global Rise of Religious Violence* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2003).

¹² Allen, Charles, *God's Terrorists: the Wahhabi Cult and the Hidden Roots of Modern Jihad*, (Cambridge, MA: Da Capo Press, 2006).

¹³ Juergensmeyer, 208-209.

remains to be done is an analysis of what al-Qaida's strategic culture means in terms of the United States' global war on terror.

It is necessary, in light of the events of this century thus far, for some strategic thinkers to reexamine thinking on groups such as al-Qaida. For instance, in *Balance of Power: Theory and Practice in the 21st Century*, Paul, Wirtz, and Fortmann argue that the emergence of non-state actors which engage in guerilla warfare against traditional actors originated from some sort of mechanical effect of "imperial overstretch."¹⁴ This assumption overlooks the fact that such groups can have strategies of their own and instead delegates the actions of these groups to a secondary role. This is at our peril in the West. The failure to understand the actors against which we are fighting is dangerous as it leads to overly simple notions of non-state actors. These actors, as it has been demonstrated throughout history, have the power to threaten the security of nations. Sadly, it also appears to be one of the foundational assumptions of current U.S. strategy. Policymakers, scholars, and informed citizens ought to reconsider their conceptions of these actors. Rather than seeing al-Qaida as an incoherent actor, we ought to consider these actors as having a strategic logic that we can follow and understand in order to make more effective policy in the region.

American Hegemony in a Stateless War

As a global hegemon, it is trivial to argue that the United States can, in terms of military might, defeat a country militarily. We can bomb cities, depose leaders, and reduce military and civilian infrastructure to ash and twisted rubble. This has been proven time and time again; the Second World War and the First Gulf War serve as fantastic examples of the sheer military might commanded by the United States. Clearly, though, as evidenced by the statements from the executive branch during the time of the formulation of current U.S. grand strategy, beating Iraq militarily was but one, secondary goal, celebrated in the now infamous "Mission Accomplished" speech in 2003.

The main theme of the War on Terror, however, is a fight not against Iraq or Afghanistan, but against **terrorism**. The "ism" in the last sentence is bold for an important reason. The 'ism' in terrorism denotes that it is an idea. That is to say, that the United States is attempting to fight an idea. Fighting the idea of terror is different than combatting the tactics of terror: the latter, as

¹⁴ Paul, T.V., James Wirtz, and Michel Fortmann (eds.), *Balance of Power: Theory and Practice in the 21st Century* (Palo Alto, CA: Stanford University Press, 2004).

evidenced by the relative few attacks on U.S. soil since 9/11, can be done. Neither any relevant literature nor the faculties of reason provide any way to bomb, invade, occupy, or otherwise militarily defeat an idea. And yet, this is exactly what the United States claims to be doing in the Middle East. This is absurd. Instead, policymakers should take the advice of Brands and “Emphasize the ‘how’ as well as the ‘what’ in making grand strategy.”¹⁵ If we ask the question of how to fight against an idea and are met with a total lack of knowledge on where to begin, perhaps fighting against an ‘ism’ ought not to be part of our grand strategy. It is highly unlikely and even absurd that any number of invasions of Middle Eastern nations will constitute a ‘win’ in the war against terrorism.

In taking more advice from the pragmatic thinker, Brands, a second group of critiques can be made:

“If American grand strategy is to be effective, U.S. officials will have to go back to first principles and confront some of the most difficult questions about the country’s global role. What is the nature of the international system in the twenty-first century, and in what direction is that system evolving?”¹⁶

These questions have not been asked in the context of strategic planning in the United States, and there have been and will continue to be consequences for this unquestioning behavior. There may well be good reasons for this. In the old international system, that of the Cold War, the United States could act in comfortable, predictable ways. The United States could play geopolitical chess knowing that the other actors, other states, were playing the same game. It was in this world that the bargaining advice of Schelling and game theory could be applied with some success, even in light of limited information.¹⁷

The international system has changed. Rather than simply being the anarchical system of nation-states outlined by Waltz, the world today has actors such as al-Qaida that cannot be bargained with in the same way because their goals transcend territory. Take, for instance, the hallmark of U.S.-Soviet relations for much of the Cold War: The United States held

¹⁵ Brands, Hal, *What Good is Grand Strategy?* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2004).

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁷ Schelling, Thomas, *The Strategy of Conflict* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1960).

Moscow hostage and the Soviets could say the same of Washington D.C. While the situation was far from ideal from a human security standpoint, mutual deterrence did, it seems, lead to mutual restraint. This is due to the territorial nature of the actors involved. The same cannot be said of a group that conceives of itself as an *ummah*, a community transcending national boundaries. As recent history has shown, al-Qaida can hit New York, but destroying Iraq and Afghanistan has not resulted in the demise of the terrorist group. The game has changed. We now live in a world in which we are faced with actors that do not have capitals we can bomb or occupy.

Rather than fighting a war of territory, the strategic culture and grand strategy of al-Qaida are, to borrow a term from Aslan, cosmic.¹⁸ Even if the United States were to agree to the explicit terms outlined by Bin Laden as goals for al-Qaida, that is to say, total U.S. and Western withdrawal from the Middle East, it is doubtful that this would end the current conflict. This is due to the fact that the war in which al-Qaida is engaged is only partly of this earth. The other half is, as discussed in the section on the development of the al-Qaida strategic culture, a battle of ideas based in an interpretation of a shared Sunni identity which mandates the destruction of nonbelievers.

Policy Recommendations

Conventional, Realist thinking in the war against terrorism has been the primary object of theoretical critique in this work. In light of this critique, several policy recommendations can be made.

First and foremost, the United States ought to define clear, achievable strategic goals. This advice is not novel. In fact, it is advocated by authors ranging from Clausewitz to Schelling and Brands. In this particular case, however, what is being called for is an end to the way we have been thinking of a war on terrorism, on the grounds that fighting an idea with military means is an exercise in tilting at windmills. Rather, the United States, if it sincerely wishes to achieve the goals of a more peaceful world, ought to focus less on drone strikes and more on the development of infrastructure and institutions in the Middle East. The United States also ought to bring the actors involved to the table in the UN headquarters as opposed to fighting in the deserts of Iraq and Syria, which is clearly a futile venture.

¹⁸ Aslan, Reza, *How to Win a Cosmic War: God, Globalization, and the end of the War on Terror* (New York: Random House, 2009).

Second, those in policy circles must carefully consider the literature on strategic culture, especially Booth's ideas on cultural relativism. It is in light of these ideas that the interested reader comes to understand that while the United States is playing geopolitical chess, al-Qaida is playing cricket; that is to say, an entirely different game. In this era wherein non-state actors are undoubtedly players in the international realm, we must, as strategists, recognize that actors behave differently.

In this work, brief definitions of both strategic culture and grand strategy have been posited using minimalist definitions of both concepts to avoid concept stretching and to allow for a broadening of theory. It is this theoretical broadening that represents the major contribution of this work. Overall, it is clear that non-state actors can have both a strategic culture and a grand strategy. In exploring the case of al-Qaida, much can be learned. It is a group with a shared identity, a sense of a historical narrative, a leadership structure, and some sense of logic. This indicates that the group has a strategic culture. Furthermore, the group has clear goals and reasonable means by which to reach them. This represents the grand strategy of the terrorist organization.

The major issue for U.S. grand strategy in dealing with al-Qaida is that the United States presupposes territoriality of actors, as many realist thinkers do. This narrative paints groups such as al-Qaida as mechanistic creations of a hegemon that has expanded too far. This is an explanation which ignores the agency of such groups and does not solve problems. The lack of tangible results in the nearly fifteen-year war against terrorism speaks to the clear flaws of current strategic thought on non-state actors as non-actors or non-important actors. A broader view may be more accurate.

Looking forward, policymakers and academics alike should be open to considering that the rules of the game are changing. Rather than nation-state to nation-state relations, in the face of a more globalized world in which physical borders appear to matter less, especially in the less-developed regions of the world, we as thinkers would be remiss if we did not consider the possibility that actors without territories could have strategic cultures and grand strategies.

Al-Qaida is not an incoherent actor that cannot be understood in its barbarity. Rather, with the careful consideration of the literatures on strategic culture and grand strategy, we can begin to unravel the mystery of al-Qaida and groups like it, such as the growing threat of ISIS. This is all done with the

implicit normative goal of attempting to bring these conflicts to as amicable an end as possible, seeking to make the world a better place through understanding of the actors which are part of the international system. Realists have done excellent work in understanding the behavior of states; it is high time for the scholastic community to also consider other actors that present problems to states and the people who occupy them. Further work would include a careful examination at the contingent place in history occupied by al-Qaida, in particular the links between the group and the Saudi state; such a history will undoubtedly cast light on some questions herein raised but is ultimately beyond the scope of this work which is largely theoretical rather than historical in nature.