

Barbara F. Walter. “The Extremist’s Advantage in Civil Wars.” *International Security* 42:2 (Fall 2017): 7-39. DOI: https://doi.org/10.1162/ISEC_a_00292.

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Published by ISSF on 27 March 2018

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Why is the number of rebel groups espousing extremist ideology—Salafi jihadism in particular—on the rise? And why have these extremist groups seemingly thrived while their moderate counterparts have struggled? Or, to reframe this question in the context of Syria’s civil war, why was the extremist Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS) far more effective at obtaining recruits and financing than the moderate Free Syrian Army?

In a provocative new article in *International Security*, Barbara Walter provides a fascinating answer to these questions. Extremist ideology, she contends, is not simply a function of the ideas and beliefs underpinning a society. Instead, the adoption of an extreme ideology is a strategic decision that rebel leaders make in order to gain a competitive advantage.

Walter argues that an extreme ideology can solve, or at least minimize, three organizational problems associated with rebellion. The first is a collective action problem. To have a shot at winning a civil war, rebel leaders must convince individuals to take up arms for their cause. This is difficult because joining a rebellion entails massive risks (e.g., death or imprisonment). Thus, even if they share the rebellion’s goals, most people would prefer to stay at home and let somebody else do the fighting. But if everyone thinks this way, the rebellion will never get off the ground. Many rebel groups try to fix this collective action problem by compensating their fighters with private goods (e.g., a salary or a right to loot from civilians). Extremist groups, however, can address this collective action problem “on the cheap” since they do not need to offer material rewards. Instead, they can make effective ideological appeals (such as a promise of rewards in the afterlife) to their followers. This allows extremist groups to save their material goods for the war effort, increasing the odds of success.

The second is a principle-agent problem. If we assume the rebel leaders are the “principles” and the potential recruits are the “agents,” a principle-agent problem arises because rebel leaders cannot perfectly monitor the behavior of their recruits (especially once they are on the battlefield). Consequently, selecting recruits is important for rebel leaders: they want to accept high quality recruits and screen out the low quality ones. Extremist groups tend to have an advantage in this process because they can ask recruits to engage in costly signals that are consistent with the group’s ideology (such following a very strict version of Islam). Overall then, extremist groups are more likely to attract recruits that are highly committed to the cause, minimizing principle-agent problems.

The third is a credible commitment problem. After gaining power, rebel leaders might renege on pledges about good governance made during the war. Indeed, there is often nothing to stop them from using their newfound power to enrich themselves at everyone else’s expense. This is crucial in the early phases of a civil war because potential fighters have little reason to line up behind leaders who will not be able to resist corruption at the war’s end. The leaders of extremist groups, however, can make relatively more credible commitments to follow through on their promises than the leaders of more moderate groups for a variety of reasons. To offer just one, promises from the leaders of extremist groups may appear more credible because everyone knows that other extremists within the group will punish the leaders if they renege.

For these three reasons, Walter argues that extremist groups have an advantage over their moderate peers. At first, only “true believers” are likely to respond to extremist appeals. But as these hard-core ideologues begin to have some initial success on the battlefield (which Walter assumes is likely since they can minimize collective action, principle-agent, and credible commitment problems), the group’s appeal will broaden further. Over time, even moderate civilians are likely to start supporting the extremist group. Though they do not really believe the group’s ideology, moderates will support it because it is more likely to win the war and institute some level of reform.

The implications of Walter’s argument are far reaching. In her words: “The recent rise of radical Islamist groups, therefore, does not necessarily indicate an increase in support for radical ideas in Muslim countries experiencing civil war as much as it may reveal average Sunnis behaving strategically during uncertain and difficult times” (8). If correct, this point could inform U.S. efforts to undercut support for radical jihadist groups. Rather than trying to convince members of these groups to abandon their “medieval” beliefs, it may be better to think about how various international intervention strategies affect the credible commitment, principle-agent, and collective action problems that incentivize groups to adopt extremism in the first place (38-39).

Like many important articles, this one raises even more questions than it answers. I will mention two.

First, how do we really know that extremists have an advantage in civil war? Walter does not explicitly define terms such as “advantage” and “thrive,” but implicitly she seems to mean that extremist groups tend to get better recruits and more funding. In this vein, Walter convincingly shows that there are benefits for rebel leaders who adopt an extremist ideology. But before we can conclude that extremist groups have an advantage over moderate groups, we should also examine costs. Consider two of the extremist groups mentioned in the article, ISIS and al-Qaeda. Precisely because they adopted extreme jihadist ideologies, these groups—and their leaders in particular—have been decimated by U.S. drone strikes. So was extremism actually advantageous overall? Walter does touch on the issue of costs in one paragraph (34). But future work would do well to consider the costs of extremism, especially internationally imposed costs, in far greater detail.

Second, do all extremist ideologies provide rebel groups with the organizational benefits that Walter describes in the article? The empirical portion of the article is quite specific: Salafi jihadism in civil wars in Muslim countries in the post-2003 period. Yet I am left wondering about the extent to which the argument might apply to other types of extremism. Would all forms of religious extremism yield similar effects? Could the argument even apply to non-religious extremist groups? This is an area that future work can and should explore—Walter’s argument may be more generalizable than the empirical portion of this article suggests.

In sum, Walter has produced a timely article that deserves wide readership in both academic and policy circles. Walter concludes by noting that she hopes her article will launch a broader research agenda on ideology in civil war (38). I expect that it will, and I look forward to seeing how the field responds to Walter’s pathbreaking article.

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