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# Is the Islamic State a Secessionist Movement?

Is the so-called Islamic State more than just a secessionist movement? Tanisha Fazal believes so. While the group controls territory and challenges the authority of existing states, it also represents a formidable challenge to the Westphalian international system.

By Tanisha M. Fazal for ISN

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The Islamic State's brutal tactics against civilians and hostages, along with its rapid military successes, have forced the international community to consider whether this group will respond credibly to carrots or sticks. To this end, understanding the group's war aims is important because war aims shed light on how rebel groups will conduct themselves during a conflict as well as the avenues for conflict termination.

The obvious designation for the Islamic State might seem to be as a secessionist movement. The word 'state' is in its name. It controls significant territory. It has its own [currency](#).

It imposes a political – really, theocratic – regime where it reigns. It [collects taxes and provides some social services](#). It challenges the authority of existing states, from Iraq to Syria to Libya.

But the Islamic State is not a secessionist movement.

## What groups want determines their behavior

The scholarly literature on civil war tends to categorize rebel groups in one of three ways: center-seeking, or revolutionary, rebels; resource rebels; or, secessionists. Center-seeking rebels aim to overthrow and replace the existing government of an existing state. The Free Syrian Army is a center-seeking group, as were the FMLN in El Salvador and Mao's communist insurgents in China. While all types of rebel groups engage in civilian targeting, center-seeking rebels often do so for the purpose of weeding out potential government collaborators, [as in Algeria in the 1990s](#). When wars with center-seeking rebels do not end in military victory, they tend to conclude in negotiated settlements where power is shared.

Resource-driven rebel groups challenge the authority of the state for mercenary reasons – they aim to control territory so that they can plunder natural resources, especially those that are easily tradeable on a global market, such as kimberlite diamonds. These groups do not necessarily have a political agenda, but rather seek to perpetuate war for the purpose of lining their own pockets. While purely resource-driven rebels are rare, the RUF in Sierra Leone is one example of a group that fought to control diamond mines that funded rebellion for years. [Rebels funded by contraband are often](#)

[especially cruel to nearby civilian populations](#), as they do not depend on civilians for food, comfort, or political support. There is a lack of consensus on whether wars funded by primary commodity exports tend to last longer or end more quickly than wars not funded in this way. They might [last longer](#) because of the incentive to perpetuate war economies, or they might [end sooner](#) because belligerents seek to protect future earnings from natural resource stocks.

Secessionist rebels seek an independent, internationally-recognized state. Secessionists are typically, although not necessarily (consider the Confederacy during the US Civil War), ethnically distinct from the rest of the population in the country from which they wish to secede. They tend to be [geographically concentrated](#), and already located near an international border. At various times, the Chechens in Russia, Tamils in Sri Lanka, Zapatistas in Mexico, and Acehese in Indonesia have all fought secessionist civil wars. Notably, none of these groups has won an independent state. Successful secessionism is [rare](#). Compared to other types of rebels, [secessionists are unlikely to target civilian populations](#), for two reasons. First, the civilian population easiest for them to target is the population that is meant to comprise their new state; attacking co-ethnics would be counterproductive. Second, secessionists are increasingly aware of the international community's preferences that they not violate the laws of war, and, unlike center-seeking or resource rebels, secessionists require the support of the international community in order to achieve their political aim of membership in that community.

### **The Kurds vs. the Islamic State**

The Kurds are a good example of a modern, politically savvy, secessionist movement. They also serve as a useful comparison to the Islamic State. Both groups span internationally-recognized boundaries and, indeed, both control significant territory in Iraq and Syria today. Beyond the transnational nature of their territorial aims, however, the two groups have little in common, and, in fact, are fighting against each other. One factor that distinguishes them is the Kurds' explicitly secessionist war aims.

In pursuit of an independent Kurdistan, the Kurds have engineered an [impressive diplomatic offensive](#). Like the Kurds, the Islamic State also boasts an enviable [public relations machine](#). But the messages they send and their intended audiences are markedly different.

The Kurds, for example, have clearly rejected the strategy of targeting civilians, and the evidence suggests that they have kept this promise. They have also [signaled their intention to abide by the 1949 Geneva Conventions](#). They [host dozens of consulates](#), including from major NGOs such as the ICRC, in Erbil. They have signed public "[deeds of commitment](#)" pledging not to use land mines or child soldiers. The official program of the Kurdish Democratic Party commits to achieving Kurdish regional and international goals "by way of general international law and peace" and in accordance with the principles laid out in the UN Charter. The Kurds have partnered with Western nations against Saddam Hussein, Bashar al-Assad, and the Islamic State. While these partnerships no doubt benefit the Kurds by helping to protect the territory they claim, the Kurds have also been reticent to declare independence formally, in part because of the international community's general aversion to unilateral declarations of independence.

Kurdish decision-making with respect to international humanitarian law, military partnerships, and restraint in diplomacy is driven by the political aim of an internationally-recognized independent state. [Statehood is valuable](#). Groups that have states are eligible for loans from international financial institutions such as the IMF and World Bank, and are protected, at least in theory, from international aggression by collective security agreements such as those laid out in the UN Charter. By contrast, groups that lack international recognition cannot engage in normal international trade, nor do they have strong recourse to international law if threatened.

The Islamic State does not seek these benefits of statehood. Its vision of sovereignty is at odds with the prevailing order of Westphalian states. Because it does not seek to join this group of states, it has little incentive to appeal to the international community. The Islamic State does not appear to want a seat at the United Nations, nor does it abide by the existing international rules of the game. We define secessionists by their political goals – independence *and* international recognition – and while the Islamic State might aim for the former, it does not seem interested in the latter. Indeed, rather than seeking to please the international community so that it can be let into the club of states, the Islamic State appears to enjoy flaunting international norms by broadcasting brutality.

## Challenging the state system

If the Islamic State is not a secessionist movement, what is it? It does not fit the profile of a center-seeking rebel group. While it might be happy to topple the Syrian or Iraqi regimes, it does not appear eager to take over the apparatus of government in those states. Nor does it seem to be primarily driven by the war economy of resource extraction; while the Islamic State has, notably, taken over [oil fields in Syria](#) and even sold oil to its enemies for profit, oil is not its primary motive for war.

Instead, the Islamic State – along with its sub-Saharan cousin, Boko Haram – is something that is both old and new: a group that seeks to replace politics with religion as the foundation of sovereignty. The [caliphate envisioned by the Islamic State](#) is [not delimited by national borders or ethnicity](#). This vision is reminiscent of the pre-Westphalian international order, which was characterized by [overlapping sovereignties](#) and [loyalties to emperors, popes, and tribes](#).

The system of international states is sufficiently well-entrenched that it is unlikely to be remade in the face of the challenge from the Islamic State. But the successes that the Islamic State has enjoyed point to an important weakness in the state system: too many internationally-recognized states lack the capacity to govern effectively. Degradation and destruction of the Islamic State's capabilities is thus a short – at best, medium – term solution. In the absence of an effective state, the territory now ruled by the Islamic State will always be vulnerable to challenge.

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