JPM718: Presentation Handout

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Stathis N. Kalyvas: Is ISIS a Revolutionary Group and if Yes, What Are the Implications?

**1. Summary of the Reading**

The main idea of the article is viewing ISIS as a revolutionary insurgent group, same as Marxist groups during Cold War, and drawing on the comparative study of civil wars, which deals with the characteristics of rebel groups. The aim of the classification is to compare and link ISIS with these groups, and on this basis describe ISIS. This conceptualization also disregards traditional view of ISIS as unique and exceptional.

The author defines revolutionary group as an armed unit which self-consciously aims to transform society in a deep and radical way by rearranging the social and political relations, furthermore it has an ideological element. According to the author, ISIS can be labelled as such group, because it puts forward agenda of big social and political transformations.

The author focuses on Marxist insurgent groups during Cold War and puts forward some characteristics. Compared to purely nationalist or other armed groups, Marxist groups were often involved in longer and deadlier conflicts and in most of the cases found themselves on the losing side. That is explained by strong states, even more strengthened by the revolutionary challenge, who fought them and often received foreign assistance. These groups fought long guerrilla and irregular wars as a weaker actor. In literature, there has been focus on their ideological element, however, the author claims, that their ability of gaining support stem from their organizational abilities in the territory they controlled.

If we consider ISIS to be same category group, we can see similarity in using the strategy of guerrilla war. However, compared to Marxist groups, ISIS manages to fight conventional war in a very early stage. This can be defined by specific characteristics of their war conditions. ISIS manages similarly well to recruit new motivated members, which in the case of Marxist groups is supported by ideological indoctrination. In the case of personnel replacement, besides accepting foreign fighters, ISIS manages to recruit locals from controlled territories. In the question of governance of territories, rebel groups usually rule consistently, but harshly clash with the local norms. It is unsure, what is going to be ISIS’s approach in this regard.

**2. Critical Analysis**

The author’s linkage of ISIS with Marxist groups from Cold War has its meaning, as there are many similarities – mostly in the core or initial part of the activities, but there is often a slight difference in how ISIS proceeds. For example, ISIS waged asymmetric guerrilla war against the states, same as Marxist groups, but managed to cross to conventional warfare much sooner. Similarly with recruitment, ISIS uses motivated foreign fighters, as Marxist groups did, but on top of that, ISIS is successful in recruiting locals.

ISIS fits the definition of rebel groups and as author described, there are many solid similarities. However, the basic similarities point to differences, and it could be argued, that the linkage is not very strong.

That being said, as author stresses, this comparison is useful for heuristic reasons, and helps us to avoid regarding ISIS as an isolated unique case.

**3. Relation to the Main Reading**

Kalyvas’s article is very similar to Mudy’s article (Deconstructing Civil Wars: Beyond the New Wars Debate) in its approach and analysis of one conflict situation by drawing on civil war theories. The main reading focuses on Algerian conflict and confronts it with civil war theories and tries to conceptualize it in accordance with it. The author searches for definition of civil war, and whether the Algerian conflict can be defined as such and why, however, not very successfully, as the theories are ambiguous and differ in definitions of civil war’s characteristics.

Kalyvas’s article quotes comparative study of civil wars, which focuses on rebel groups. Describing ISIS, which is an actor in civil war, the author uses definition of Marxist rebel groups from Cold War and uses this category for describing ISIS. It seems, Kalyva was more successful in describing his objective, exactly because using a different historical group, borrowing its characteristics and comparing it the observed one. Another expansion of the main article is the focus on rebel groups, rather than on the civil war as a whole, and describing situation from the rebel group’s point of view.