Introduction

> The life of all thought is to effect a junction at some point of the new and the old, of deep sunk customs and unconscious dispositions, that are brought to the light of attention by some conflict with newly emerged directions of activity. Philosophies which emerge at distinctive periods define larger patterns of continuity which are woven in, effecting enduring junctions of a stubborn past and an insistent future.
>
> —John Dewey, *Philosophy and Civilization*

The response to September 11 in the study of international politics encompassed claims of epochal change as well as dismissals that the event was a mere aberration. Both positions reinforce the atypicality of the events, but neither is sustainable. Nearly a decade and a half later, international relations theory has yet to engage the full range of questions raised by September 11, particularly those at the levels of the international system and society. This study addresses two of those questions. First, how and when do new, dissimilar kinds of political actors appear on the international stage and not only survive but have significant effects on international politics, and, second, how do these novel actors affect the development of international society?[1] Existing theory has tended to focus on the likening constraints of the material underpinnings of the international system, or to emphasize the emancipatory, creative energies of agency and their fostering of variety. Neither adequately captures the mixture and interaction of constraints and opportunities that emerging actors face as they seek security and survival in international systems. Moreover, the international societal effects associated with these actors go well beyond the violence that accompanies their quest for existence and influence, making purely actuarial accounts of their significance all the more wanting,[2] and cannot be captured by theories that devalue the non-material elements of international politics.

[1] Novelty in this case refers to newness to the actors that compose the system, as well as them having system-spanning scope and effects.

[2] Arguments that seek to dismiss the significance of Al Qaeda have been couched in crudely quantitative dismissals of the overall impact of terrorism on US national security. Unfortunately, they have too often relied on sophistic comparisons (deaths from attacks to slipping in a bathtub) and *ad hominem* (labeling those who focus on terrorist threats as at

Due to their atypicality, these actors confound the system's composition, the actors with which they contend, and as a result, existing theories of international relations. The systemic origins of these actors (including the timing and conditions of their emergence) and their societal effects (including both material and non-material impacts) are interrelated due to their peculiar and highly disruptive character. This makes addressing each of these areas in concert necessary to capture the mechanisms and processes that underlie these episodes.[3] Al Qaeda is an actor of strikingly distinct composition from the major actors in the international system, challenging the system's predominant power, evoking and provoking a reaction both domestically and internationally that belies claims of insignificance. How did this happen, and what can accounts of similarly dissimilar historical actors tell us about their international systemic origins and international societal effects?

Argument and key concepts

I argue the decline of once-dominant powers enables expanded agency for marginal political organizations to exert themselves as systemic actors rather than subsystemic adjuncts. These actors may take on novel forms, in part due to distinct sets of constraints, or "opportunity structures," that affect their tendency to adhere to predominant developmental pathways.

best "deluded" and at worst seeking gain). Even more unfortunate is that the central message of these analyses has merit: the United States *has*, at times, both overreacted and clumsily responded to the threat. The exclusive focus on US casualties, moreover, when the vast majority of the deaths from Al Qaeda's actions have happened to Muslims abroad, is another aspect that should discount this analysis when accounting for the group's significance. For an example of the demotion of the significance of Al Qaeda, see John Mueller and Mark G. Stewart, "The Terrorism Delusion: America's Overwrought Response to September 11," *International Security* 37, no. 1 (summer 2012): 81–110. While body counts are problematic as a measure of relative significance, among democratic peace theorists 1,000 fatalities is offered as a benchmark for determining what constitutes a war, defined as "large-scale institutionally organized lethal violence." Bruce Russett, *Grasping the Democratic Peace* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993), 12. Although large-scale institutions may be more amenable to study, they have not maintained their monopoly on large-scale lethal violence.

[3] According to Charles Tilly: "Mechanism- and process-based accounts explain salient features of episodes, or significant differences among them, by identifying within those episodes robust mechanisms of relatively general scope." Distinguishing these, Tilly explains that mechanisms "form a delimited class of events that change relations among specified sets of elements in identical or closely similar ways over a variety of situations. . . ." while processes "are frequently occurring combinations or sequences of mechanisms." Episodes, he adds, "are bounded streams of social life." Charles Tilly, "Mechanisms in Political Processes," *Annual Review of Political Science* 4 (2001): 24–26. While recognizing these distinctions this study uses the labels "mechanisms" and "processes" interchangeably or as a compound.

In so doing they avoid the likening pressures of international systems, most prominently emphasized in neorealism, which have been highlighted to explain how international systems over time have tended toward rough structural homogeneity among units. It is the interaction of expanded opportunities and often severe constraints that creates conditions that foster structural and behavioral dissimilarity in systemic circumstances that might otherwise favor isomorphic outcomes. Systemic change (change *within* the system and its power distribution) in the form of the decline of dominant actors sets in motion mechanisms and processes that lead to system change (change *of* the system and its composition).[4]

The actors highlighted in this study – the Nizari Ismailis (Assassins), Mongols, Barbary powers, and Al Qaeda – each deviated structurally in their development leading to dissimilar unit outcomes compared to their more powerful challengers. The mechanisms and processes underlying this deviation are captured under the label "logic of dissimilation." These structural deviations most often accompanied behaviors that enhanced the chances of survival for the weaker of those challengers. Because of their precarious environments these actors adopt strategies including hiding from their more powerful competitors, deceiving others about their intentions, and, at times, masking their true identity. The Mongols were an exception among these systemic exceptions, given that they amassed enough power to make these strategies – labeled here "logics of concealment" – adjunct rather than core behaviors. But in their deviation from these deviations, the Mongols provide further insight into how these logics realize.

The actors' growing relevance combined with their marked departure from expected patterns, in turn, create a climate of uncertainty that helps spur the development of international society. This happens in response to normative development associated with coping with uncertainty, and the interrelated effects on identity formation from encounters with unlike "others." The interaction of these processes is best understood through engagement with the concept of "ontological security." "Ontological security," Bill McSweeney writes, "relates to the self, its social competence, its confidence in the actor's capacity to manage relations with others. It is a security of a social relationship, a sense of being safely in cognitive control of the interaction context."[5] Confounding these relationships, these actors unsettle stable patterns, setting off reactions in their times that manifest in the form of the components of

[4] "Dominant" actors refers to those that have the greatest power in the system as well as to the dominant mode of organization.

[5] Bill McSweeney, *Security, Identity, and Interests: A Sociology of International Relations* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 157.

international society. Eventually the historical dissimilar actors became symbols for illegitimate political institutions and conduct, and helped draw the boundaries between civilization and barbarism. These mechanisms and processes help account for principles of legitimacy, rightful membership and conduct, most recognizably in the form of standards of civilization. In this way, these actors have played a significant role in the development of norms and identities that constitute international society. Those boundaries include those that Al Qaeda rudely transgressed, and which it continues to help define.

The use of the label "dissimilar" is intended to draw a distinction between dissimilarity and difference, and to avoid some of the traps associated with the discussion of "like" and "unlike" units. Distinguishing between "like" and "unlike" units is limited by the difficulty operationalizing this distinction. The Russian Federation and France are "like" as sovereign states, but "unlike" as a patchwork empire and a highly centralized nation-state. Were early modern England and Venice "like" actors because they fielded militaries and controlled territory from a capital, or were they an "unlike" composite monarchy and republican maritime city-empire?[6] Focusing on similarities stifles appreciation of variety and understanding of its effects, while focusing on variety can inhibit generalization and determination of important patterns.[7]

"Similarity" and "dissimilarity" here refer primarily to convergence with, or divergence from, the organization of political space in any given international system, and most importantly, how these traits affect the edges of that space and interactions with other actors. The novelty or distinctiveness of political units is the primary factor in distinguishing this phenomenon, rather than the heterogeneity or homogeneity of the preexisting system. However, a higher degree of homogeneity in a system is likely to provide our best measure of the manifestation and impact of a dissimilar form. Paradoxically, by this definition in a more diverse system – containing larger numbers of dissimilar types – actors overall may be more similar given their conformity to plural types. Another benefit of examining largely homogeneous and less diverse systems is that greater similarity among actors would also place increased pressures on actors to imitate, through the processes of emulation and socialization, improving

[6] These comparisons and characterizations were helpfully provided during an exchange with an anonymous reader of the book's typescript.

[7] Georg Sørenson points to the presence of weak states in the European state system as evidence that "unlike units" may not be subject to the Darwinian pressures posited in neorealism. Georg Sørenson, "'Big and Important Things' in IR," in *Realism and World Politics*, ed. Ken Booth (London and New York: Routledge, 2011), 111. Without complete homogeneity of shape, size, and relative power of actors in a system, however, one can always find some distinctions, which are not necessarily indicative of true variety.

clarity concerning circumstances that may allow or compel resistance to those pressures. We would also expect that the juxtaposition of a dissimilar actor to more similar, homogeneous rivals would amplify the international societal effects, making them more observable. For those reasons the preexisting systems examined here are primarily composed of roughly similar types of dominant actors, a condition that makes the emergence of a dissimilar form all the more unlikely and confounding.

Dissimilar units have important features of their spatial organization that deviate from expected or established patterns. The relationship between authority and territory differs markedly among political communities, but this is not sufficient to determine dissimilarity as a condition of a system.[8] France and the Ottoman Empire had quite a bit in common despite having clear distinctions in their internal structures. They interacted as major powers of an extended European state system that was continuing to form with the territorial consolidation that would create the modern international system. The Barbary powers, in contrast, competed in that emerging system as city-states, when that form was moving toward effective extinction, making the distinctions between France and the Ottomans less salient than their similarities in that systemic context. Like neorealism, dissimilarity here is not concerned with the internal characteristics of the unit, like modes of governance. Deviations in internal spatial relations may help define the edges of political spaces, influencing the form or shape of the actor in its interactions with other actors, but they are not enough in themselves to establish dissimilarity.[9]

Having outlined the main argument and clarified some key concepts, it is also important to specify what this study does not claim or attempt. There is no effort to provide a broadly generalizable theory of the origins of all kinds of structurally dissimilar actors nor the sources of heterogeneous systems across history.[10] The variety of such systems and

[8] Barry Buzan and Richard Little, while embracing a more expansive view of the varieties of international systems and actors, point out that "[i]t is not at all clear where one should stop differentiating once the idea of domestic structure is opened up," noting that distinctions among what are seen as quite similar units can be pronounced. Barry Buzan and Richard Little "Reconceptualizing Anarchy: Structural Realism Meets World History," *European Journal of International Relations* 2, no. 4 (December 1996): 426.

[9] The edges may indeed be inside the unit, the interstices of authority and not the gaps between distinct, adjacent authorities. Nesting, according to Yale Ferguson and Richard Mansbach, refers to the "phenomenon in which some polities are encapsulated by others and embedded within them." See Yale H. Ferguson and Richard W. Mansbach, *Polities: Authorities, Identities, and Change* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1996), 48.

[10] For a more ambitious effort along those lines, see Barry Buzan and Richard Little, *International Systems in World History: Remaking the Study of International Relations* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000).

overdetermined nature of their origins would almost certainly doom such an effort. Rather, the study focuses on a subset where actors emerge into systems of rough homogeneity, thwart existing modes of spatial organization and behavior, survive for some extended period of time, and have distinct systemic and societal effects. Nor is there an effort to account for the full lifecycle of these actors, though observations of their duration and viability can provide insight concerning the neorealist premise that the logic of emulation reinforces similarity among units.

One would expect actors to exploit major power decline to establish themselves as actors of systemic import. Few manage to do this, and still fewer take on distinctive forms and survive. Neorealism considers that outcome to be the least likely – if not impossible for any extended duration – due to the effects of competition and the advantages of imitating successful practices. Other theories allow for plural systems but emphasize opportunities over constraints.[11] The emphasis in this study on systemic and structural forces does not exclude agency in explaining these rare but highly disruptive episodes. Relatively few episodes of decline spawn marked departures in structural form, particularly in systems still populated by other powerful actors. Where severe constraints, including powerful and hostile competitors and material deprivation, make innovation a prerequisite for survival, one would expect key leaders to play an important role in recognizing and taking advantage of these constraints and opportunities. The question of how some actors survive despite severe disadvantages, and in at least one instance (the Mongols) go on to dominate their adjoining systems, also requires digging into their relationships with dominant powers prior to their emergence as systemic players.

Like its bounded scope for international systemic outcomes, this study does not offer a general theory for the development of international society, but it should help deepen our understanding of forces behind its unfolding. Barry Buzan's observation of the functional drivers behind the development of international society provides a departure point, as does his extension of structural realism to explain outcomes that go beyond that theory's purview.[12] This study takes advantage of these episodes to examine how additional logics of anarchy bring about

[11] Granted, this is mostly in order to correct structural arguments that overemphasize constraints. See Philip G. Cerny, "Political Agency in a Globalizing World: Toward a Structurational Approach," *European Journal of International Relations* 6, no. 4 (December 2000): 435–63.

[12] Barry Buzan, "From International System to International Society: Structural Realism and Regime Theory Meet the English School," *International Organization* 47, no. 3 (Summer 1993): 334.

functional societal adaptations *and* spur processes of identity formation. In concert, functional and identity-based responses act and interact to provide building blocks for international society in these systems and beyond.

By expanding our understanding of divergent systemic forces, and systemic and societal outcomes, there is no effort here to "dethrone" the logic of anarchy.[13] Indeed, the study is founded initially on the central assumption that unitary actors under anarchy compete in conditions of uncertainty and self-help that make international systems inherently conflictual. Where it departs is in examining how additional logics of anarchy rooted in those conditions make international systems less predictable in terms of their composition and behaviors than previously appreciated. It also recognizes that existing theory tells us little about the relationships between the international systemic and societal phenomena that emerge when formative and behavioral expectations are dashed, like during the shock and confusion that occurred following September 11.

Theoretical approach

In one of my articles I noted Al Qaeda's status as not only an international societal misfit but also a paradigmatic one.[14] Just as the actor rudely flouts conventions, it transgresses paradigmatic divisions involving a broad range of frameworks: transnational relations (dealing with a non-state actor), constructivism (the high profile of ideas including religious ideology), international society (with the overt challenge to international societal norms), and realism (concerning power and violence in the international system).[15] Because of its heterodox nature, no one of these frameworks is capable of explaining the phenomenon in full.

[13] See Ken Booth, "Dare Not to Know: International Relations Theory versus the Future," in *International Relations Theory Today*, ed. Ken Booth and Steve Smith (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1995), 330.

[14] See William J. Brenner, "In Search of Monsters: Realism and Progress in International Relations Theory after September 11," *Security Studies* 15, no. 3 (July–September 2006): 496–528.

[15] High-quality work has followed in, and across, most of these areas. For an examination of violent transnational actors, see Oded Löwenheim, *Predators and Parasites: Persistent Agents of Transnational Harm and Great Power Authority* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2007). Among the number of works on the role of religion in world politics is the collection Jack Snyder, ed., *Religion and International Relations Theory* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011). The role of religious devotion in the duration of conflicts is investigated in Michael C. Horowitz, "Long Time Going: Religion and the Duration of Crusading," *International Security* 34, no. 2 (Fall 2009): 162–93. The intersection of transnational networks and religious ideology are treated in-depth in Daniel H. Nexon, *The Struggle for Power in Early Modern Europe: Religious Conflict, Dynastic Empires, and International Change* (Princeton: Princeton University Press,

Accordingly, claims of proprietary explanatory power, particularly to the exclusion of other paradigms, ring hollow.[16] "Theoretical pluralism," K.J. Holsti writes, "is the only possible response to the multiple realities of a complex world." Establishing orthodoxies, or tumbling them with "intellectual knockouts," he notes, misses opportunities for expanding knowledge.[17]

The move in the study of international relations toward employing theoretical constructs from multiple research programs, or analytic eclecticism, has become increasingly prevalent and sophisticated.[18] Rudra Sil and Peter Katzenstein have provided useful guidelines for judging the substance and merit of theoretically eclectic work. "The distinctiveness of analytic eclecticism," they write, "arises from its effort to specify how elements of different causal stories might coexist as part of a more complex argument that bears on problems of interest to both scholars and practitioners."[19] While the pluralist posture of this study was primarily compelled by the nature of the phenomenon, the more intensive

2009), and John M. Owen, IV, *The Clash of Ideas in World Politics: Transnational Networks, States, and Regime Change, 1510–2010* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2010). The functioning of international society in reaction to the spread of transnational jihadism is investigated in Barak Mendelsohn, *Combating Jihadism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009), while challenges to world order, including from radical Islamism, are covered in Andrew Phillips, *War, Religion, and Empire: The Transformation of International Orders* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011) and Mendelsohn, "God vs. Westphalia: Radical Islamist Movements and the Battle for Organizing the World," *Review of International Studies* 38, no. 3 (July 2012): 589–613.

[16] Realism was quickly singled out for exclusion following the attacks. See Daniel Philpott, "The Challenge of September 11 to Secularism in International Relations," *World Politics* 55, no. 1 (October 2002): 66. While it is true that other paradigms have fared better in approaching the broad problem set presented by Al Qaeda, the presumptive exclusion of realism would be self-defeating, particularly when trying to examine the group's systemic origins and impact.

[17] Events that contravene paradigmatic boundaries, Holsti notes, may cause crises or even revolutions within an analytic framework, spawning "new research programs, themes, [and] sets of new questions" for theory to address. See Kalevi J. Holsti, "Mirror, Mirror on the Wall, Which Are the Fairest Theories of All?" *International Studies Quarterly* 33, no. 3 (September 1989): 255–61. On the value of observed deviation in advancing scientific knowledge, see Imre Lakatos, *Proofs and Refutations: The Logic of Mathematical Discovery* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1976), 96. I previously highlighted that the very deviation in structure and behavior by Al Qaeda presents an opportunity for progress. See Brenner, "In Search of Monsters."

[18] For justification, elaboration, and exemplars of analytic eclecticism, see Rudra Sil and Peter J. Katzenstein, eds., *Beyond Paradigms: Analytic Eclecticism in the Study of World Politics* (Basingstoke; New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010). Patrick Jackson grounds the approach in the philosophy of science in *The Conduct of Inquiry in International Relations: Philosophy of Science and Its Implications for the Study of World Politics* (New York: Routledge, 2010).

[19] Rudra Sil and Peter J. Katzenstein, "Analytic Eclecticism in the Study of World Politics: Reconfiguring Problems and Mechanisms across Research Traditions," *Perspectives on Politics* 8, no. 2 (June 2010): 414.

examination and definition of analytic eclecticism can help provide a more refined explanation of the goals and means employed here.

Sil and Katzenstein identify three characteristics that distinguish analytically eclectic work, each exemplified in this study. First, analytically eclectic work "proceeds at least implicitly on the basis of a pragmatist ethos."[20] This study was born of the analytic disorientation following the real-world disorientation after the attacks of September 11. It also aims to bring the focus back on the real-world problem of coping with Al Qaeda and its offshoots. Second, analytically eclectic work "addresses problems of wide scope that . . . incorporate more of the complexity and messiness of particular real-world situations." Here, examination of the origins, behavior, and international societal impact are woven to present a narrative that accounts for the stages of the emergence of these types of actors, the disruption they produce, and reactions of contemporary and future observers. Third, in order to account for such a multifaceted inquiry, Sil and Katzenstein explain, some parsimony is lost in favor of "complex causal stories that incorporate different types of mechanisms as defined and used in diverse research traditions."[21] In order to address the scope of this problem, in this study a range of mechanisms and processes from diverse research traditions are applied, adapted, and combined. Each stage of the theoretical narrative could be treated in greater depth, but not without compromising the ability to address a fuller scope of factors behind the rupture Al Qaeda brought about in the international system and society.

It would be sufficient to justify this pluralist approach by emphasizing its match with the problem set, but there are further benefits for the advancement of theory among and within paradigms. Mark Blyth observed that the field, despite its numerous rifts, advances in both an intra- and inter-paradigmatic fashion, in both a linear and a dialectical manner.[22] Much of that inter-paradigmatic progress may have resulted from the "gladiatorial contests" among paradigms that dominated the field in the past.[23] This study will provide little help to resolve those struggles as no major debate, for instance over the import of norms in international systems, is made the focus let alone settled. With this problem-focused theory, such persistent rifts are dangerous distractions, the main progress being found in areas of theoretical convergence among

[20] Ibid., 412. [21] Ibid., 419.
[22] Mark Blyth, "Structures Do Not Come with an Instruction Sheet: Interests, Ideas, and Progress in Political Science," *Perspectives on Politics* 1, no. 4 (December 2003): 695–706.
[23] See Christopher Reus-Smit, "The Constructivist Challenge after September 11," in *International Society and Its Critics*, ed. Alex J. Bellamy (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 82.

paradigms, with clear benefits accruing within individual research programs as well.

The overarching emphasis in this study, how systemic developments rooted in the logics of anarchy may engender international society, is one opening for a progressive inter-paradigmatic exchange between neorealists and members of the English School. Within the English School there has been not only extensive discussion of the social factors operating in international politics, but also a greater appreciation of the variety of systems and actors across time. While the opposition to realist explanations is visceral in many segments of the field, this is not the case with a sizeable subset of the English School.[24] The English School and those whom Richard Little termed "American realists" do have differences. Realists have not been as enthusiastic about the English School, pointing to what they see as the methodological and theoretical deficiencies of treatments of international society.[25] Realism's relative ahistorical content, English School theorists argue, particularly with respect to its understanding of the composition and structure of international systems, neglects both the varieties of systems and their social elements.[26]

Originating this study's argument from Buzan's insight concerning the effects of anarchy, and its materially driven roots, on the development of international society could be seen as shutting out those in the English School who emphasize shared identity. An interpretation starting with materialist presumptions may suggest that the elements of international society (norms, rules, legitimacy) are wholly instrumental, more fitting with Robert Gilpin's model where the dominant power(s) determine the system's rights and rules.[27] But societal outcomes in this study are not

[24] The affinities of classical realism and the English School are discussed in Richard Little, "The English School vs. American Realism: A Meeting of Minds or Divided by a Common Language?" *Review of International Studies* 29 (2003): 443–60. In works like *The Logic of Anarchy* and *International Systems in World History* the debt to realism, particularly Waltz's structural variant, and its foundational role are recognized. See Barry Buzan, Charles Jones, and Richard Little, *The Logic of Anarchy: Neorealism to Structural Realism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993); and Buzan and Little, *International Systems in World History*.

[25] See Dale C. Copeland, "A Realist Critique of the English School," *Review of International Studies* 29, no. 3 (July 2003): 427–41.

[26] Little, "The English School vs. American Realism," 458. Paul Schroeder made the observation that the assumption of structurally induced sameness in neorealism, focusing on policy behavior, makes it "unhistorical, perhaps anti-historical." Paul Schroeder, "Historical Reality vs. Neo-Realist Theory," *International Security* 19, no. 1 (Summer 1994): 148. Advances in expanding the historical purview to enrich international relations theory include Stuart J. Kaufman, Richard Little, and William C. Wohlforth, eds., *The Balance of Power in World History* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007).

[27] Robert Gilpin, *War and Change in World Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981).