Mohammad in Texas: When Transnational Civil Society Becomes Violent

How are citizens of Western democracies who depict Mohammad in art endangered by the globalization of the call to jihad by the Islamic State and other Islamic terrorist movements? How does the violent activity of radical Islamic groups, which seeks to punish the creators of these depictions, actually threaten conceptions of Westphalian sovereignty? What conclusions can be drawn from possible IS activity within US borders in response to a cartoon contest? How will the US respond to internationally organized violence around a freedom of speech issue within its borders?

On May 3, 2015 the Curtis Culwell Center in Garland, Texas held a contest amongst cartoonists to depict the Islamic prophet Muhammad, offering a $10,000 prize. At the event, two armed men opened fire on a security guard, wounding him. They were promptly killed. Two days later, the Islamic State took responsibility for the attack on a Syria-based radio station, saying, "We say to the American, the defended of the cross, what's coming will be even worse." (Horwitz and Goldman, May 5, 2015, *The Washington Post*)

Due to supplemental teachings to the Quran which explicitly forbid images of the Prophet, some Muslims view creating any image of the Prophet, and particularly an unfavorable image, to be blasphemy. The response to the cartoon contest in Texas is evocative of a violent tradition surrounding negative depictions of the prophet, and Islam as a whole, in Europe.

In 2004, Dutch film director Theo van Gogh was murdered due to his production of the film *Submission*, which criticized the treatment of women in Islam. After repeatedly shooting van Gogh and leaving a note stabbed into his chest, the assailant was arrested and found to have terrorist ties with the Dutch Islamist Hofstad network.

On September 30, 2005, the Danish newspaper *Jyllands-Posten* published 12 editorial cartoons depicting Muhammad. The drawings were solicited to contribute to the debate about criticism of Islam and censorship. Initially the Muslim community launched a legal complaint against the newspaper, organized a peaceful protest in Copenhagen and mobilized Danish Muslims through social media. The Organisation of Islamic Cooperation and Arab League wrote a joint, concerned letter to the Prime Minister. However, international protests against the cartoons turned violent in January and February of 2006, leading to approximately 200 deaths (Cohen, October 15, 2012,*The New York Times*). Since2006, numerous violent plots have been discovered, targeting editor Flemming Rose, cartoonist Kurt Westergaard, and the employees of *Jyllands-Posten* and other newspapers which printed the cartoons.

On January 7, 2015, two brothers attacked the offices of the French satirical newspaper *Charlie Hebdo*, killing 11 people and injuring 11 others. They claimed to belong to the Islamic terrorist group Al-Qaeda's branch in Yemen, who took responsibility for the attack. *Charlie Hebdo* had a history of controversy over its depictions of Mohammad. In 2006, the newspaper reprinted the *Jyllands-Posten* cartoons. In 2011, the cover depicted a cartoon of Mohammad with the issue retitled *Charia Hebdo* (Sharia Weekly), after which its office was firebombed. In 2012, it published a series of satirical cartoons of Mohammad, including a naked depiction. In 2013, al-Qaeda put Editor-in-chief Stephane Charbonnier and three *Jyllands-Posten* staff members on its most wanted list.

Mohammad in Texas: When Transnational Civil Society Becomes Violent

Written by Hope Lozano Bielat

The divisive issue of publicly depicting the prophet Mohammed, which has arguably led to hundreds of deaths internationally, has now arrived at the doorstep of the United States. The violent actors in the Garland, Texas case have been linked to the Islamic State, which poses a security threat to peace in the Middle East and threatens the security of the United States. It is most likely the case that the two shooters were not Islamic State operators, but were rather inspired by the organization and its goals.

Islamic State not only claims sovereignty over a defined territory in Iraq and Syria; it also has a transnational community of supporters, united by the belief that a Muslim Caliphate should be reestablished and that infidels should leave all lands which were once Muslim. This transnational community has members in the United States that violently act, as in the case in Garland, independently, with only the power of suggestion from official IS organization.

On May 6, Islamic State representatives posted a public threat to Pamela Geller, the "Draw Mohammad" event's organizer and a claim of a strong presence in the US. The post states:

We have 71 trained soldiers in 15 different states ready at our word to attack any target we desire. Out of the 71 trained soldiers 23 have signed up for missions like Sunday, We are increasing in number bithnillah. Of the 15 states, 5 we will name… Virginia, Maryland, Illinois, California, and Michigan. The disbelievers who shot our brothers think that you killed someone untrained, nay, they gave you their bodies in plain view because we were watching. (*Justpasteit*, 2015)

This is not just a domestic freedom of speech issue. This is an international relations issue. How we respond to violent threats against freedom of speech on US soil sets the tone for how the US government will interact with jihadist groups internationally. The regime of violence and repression which has ensued in Europe over the publication of images of Mohammad could extend to the United States, especially due to the fact that Islamic State supporters live in the US and view the terms of international engagement in pre-Westphalian terms. In other words, they view territorial borders according to long-existing religious affiliations, not modern definitions of nation-state lines.

The most traditional conception of Westphalian sovereignty is that a country has supreme authority over the internal affairs within its borders. The attack in Garland, Texas not only threatens American citizens exercising their freedom of speech, it also violates US sovereignty as a nation state in the global order as it exists today. Islamic State continues to claim "sovereignty" over the territory it controls in Iraq and Syria, and yet continues to show a profound lack of respect for the sovereignty of other nation-states in the post-Westphalian world order.

Islamic State has two faces. First, it seeks to be a sovereign state, with internationally recognized borders, which governs and provides for people within its borders. Second, it exists as a transnational social civil society, claiming supporters globally, regardless of national affiliation. A broad body of literature on transnational civil society sets a theoretical backdrop which informs the understanding of Islamic State as something other than a traditional state actor.

Ronnie Lipschutz defines transnational civil society as "the self-conscious constructions of networks of knowledge and action, by decentered, local actors, that cross the reified boundaries of space as though they were not there" (Lipschutz, 1992, pg. 390). According to Haynes, transnational civil society aims "to cultivate regular, expanding interactions across national boundaries when at least one actor is a non-state agent or does not operate on behalf of a national government or an intergovernmental organization" (Haynes, 2012, pg. 145). Robert Keohane and Joseph Nye count the presence of transnational networks as one of four conditions that comprise complex interdependence, and argue that these networks limit governments' abilities to control outcomes (Keohane and Nye, 2001).

In her classic work, *The Third Force*, Ann Florini examines the rise of transnational civil society. She writes, "Transnational civil society networks-the emerging third force in global politics-tend to aim for broader goals based on their conceptions of what constitutes the public good. They are bound together more by shared values than by self-interest" (Florini, 2000, pg. 7). Florini finds that transnational civil society "exercises influence through its ability to make someone, policy makers or public, listen and act. The currency of its power is not force, but credible

Mohammad in Texas: When Transnational Civil Society Becomes Violent
Written by Hope Lozano Bielat

information and moral authority" (Florini, 2000, pg. 11). Florini analyzes transnational civil societies' limits of power. There is "no single, coherent transnational civil society agenda" (Florini, 2000, pg. 213). The networks are powerful only as long as they hold credibility. When the transnational civil society forgets that its power is soft and acts as though its power is hard, "it not only fails to achieve its immediate objectives by also undermines the moral authority that is its real claim to influence" (Florini, 2000, pg. 214).

Keck and Sikkink take the concept of transnational civil society one step further in defining transnational advocacy networks. They write, "by building new links among actors in civil societies, states, and international organizations, transnational advocacy networks multiply the channels of access to the international system" (Keck and Sikkink, 1998, pg. 1). Although Keck and Sikkink's transnational advocacy networks do not have coercive capacity, their use of "power of their information, ideas, and strategies to alter the information and value contexts within which states make policies" (Keck and Sikkink, 1998, pg. 16) is evocative of what Islamic State is doing within the domestic US context.

It is the mobilization of this transnational civil society into a violent force that is so dangerous. If mere suggestion could cause two men without histories of violence to attack a "Draw Mohammad" contest in Garland, Texas, how long before the US, like Europe, has more attacks on Americans who in their expression of freedom of speech offend the sensibilities of Islamic State sympathizers, or if their propaganda is to be believed, Islamic State operatives here in the US? In combining elements of a transnational civil society, as described by Lipschutz, Florini, and Keck and Sikkink with the most violent elements of modern day jihad, the Islamic State poses a greater threat to US sovereignty and security than any traditional state actor on the stage today.

And yet, if we accept the current literature on transnational civil society, perhaps Islamic State would be more successful in winning international favor, and even international recognition of its borders, if it did not resort to extreme levels of violence. More focus upon building the transnational civil society could lead to further success in establishing a state recognized in the post-Westphalian world order. Unfortunately, the single-minded focus on rebuilding the Islamic Caliphate through violence will obscure the opportunity for political movements based on shared values and non-violent advocacy. Such movements, capitalizing on traditional conceptions of transnational civil society, could produce a modern nation-state in Iraq and Syria, beholden to post-Westphalian norms. As of yet, this is not the case, and drawing a cartoon of Mohammad can still risk death for those involved, even in the United States.

References

Cohen, Patricia. October 15, 2012. "Danish Cartoon Controversy". *The New York Times*.

Florini, Ann M. 2000. *The Third Force: The Rise of Transnational Civil Society* (Tokyo, Japan: Japan Center for International Exchange), 7.

Haynes, Jeffrey. 2012. *Religious Transnational Actors and Soft Power.* (Surrey, UK: Ashgate Publishing), 145.

Horwitz, Sari and Adam Goldman. May, 5, 2015. "Gunman who attacked Texas event likely inspired by the Islamic state, officials say." *The Washington Post.* (Accessed May 6, 2015)

Justpasteit. 2015. "Posting from Anonymous90". (Online). (Accessed May 6, 2015).

Keck, Margaret E. and Kathryn Sikkink. 1998. *Activists Beyond Borders: Advocacy Networks in International Politics* (New York: Cornell University Press), 1.

Keohane, Robert and Joseph Nye, 2001. *Power and Interdependence* (3rd edition) (New York: Longman).

Lipschutz, Ronnie. 1992. "Reconstructing World Politics: The Emergence of Global Civil Society." *Millenium*, 21, 3, pg. 390.

Mohammad in Texas: When Transnational Civil Society Becomes Violent

Written by Hope Lozano Bielat

Watson, Julie and Ryan Van Velzer. May 6, 2015. "Doubts raised about Islamic State's claim in Texas attack."*Times of Israel.* (Accessed May 6, 2015).

About the author:

Hope Lozano Bielat received her PhD in Political Science from Boston University and her MPP in International Security from the Harvard Kennedy School. She currently serves as a Fox Alumni Research and Service Fellow at the University of Pennsylvania. Her research interests include the intersection of international relations and religion, transnationalism, terrorism, and inclusive security.